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MODEL SUITE

"Introducing a large amount of supportive/subsidized housing to camh's site would work against other important priorities such as reducing the stigma attached to 1001 Queen Street West and MAXIMIZING CAMH'S FINANCIAL RETURN FROM THE LEASE OF NON-CAMH LANDS." From $CAMH'S own PLANNING GUIDELINES!

Notice how the language of "removing stigma" is now used to justify REMOVING CLIENTS from the grounds. Aren't they saying, in effect, that CLIENTS HURT PROPERTY VALUES? What will they think of next? A new kind of "clientless" hospital? Now, that would be an innovation! A $CAMHospital! Any ROOMS FOR RENT, in Parkdale?

ANOTHER WORKMAN FARTS PRODUCTION



"Based on the author's experiences working for Regeneration House, a notoriously crummy Hell House for CAMH patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, in Parkdale Toronto. It's still there, crummier than ever."

I remember when the manager called. I was out looking for Manon. She had run away from us again. Every time she did so just made it more likely that she'd soon be back in the mental ward. She wanted so badly to be with her family.

He began as he usually did, by asking me if I could work Keith's shift on Monday. Actually, there was one significant difference, which indicated that he was thinking ahead. He began by asking me where I was. I suppose he didn't want me to break down on the street when he told me. Keith died this weekend.

*

I started to work at Anomie House about a year and a half ago. Keith trained me on my second shift, although he normally didn't work nights. I'm afraid the regular night guy had already had enough of me after one session. As always Keith was the one to step in and help me out. I was totally overwhelmed by my new job, but Keith's calm manner and sense of humor pulled me through.

Keith subsequently became what I most looked forward to about the House. Because I lived (and still live, alas) right next door, some mornings I would even wait on the front steps just to see him arrive, I got such a kick out of him. I'm sure he found me very annoying. I looked forward to him every day, even when he was on vacation. I was only waiting to see him again.

I knew at the time that this kind of dependency was dangerous, and now I suppose I'm paying the price, because it looks like I'll be waiting for Keith forever, with his smart looking car, his young attire (always running shoes, shorts or jeans, a long-sleeved brightly-covered shirt over a T-shirt) and the "Roots" bag slung over his shoulder, the master key dangling from it on a strap.

These things happen. I suppose the price of knowing someone as nice as Keith is that you might lose him. Inevitably, maybe. I suppose we all pay that price in different ways. I've had to pay it by quitting, because while I know I'll probably always miss Keith and wait for him too, it would just be too painful to miss and wait for him there, with traces of the man but not, of course, Keith.

The last time I saw Keith was Friday night. I'd come to take a few tenants to the museum. On Friday admission to the galleries was free after 4:30 P.M. I'd promised Amanda that we'd visit the Egyptian section. We were disappointed to find that it was closed for renovation, but at least there were a few caskets on display under the rotunda. Amanda wasn't that enthusiastic about them. Her bum was sore. Their displays were pale compared to her every day delusions. Leon was impressed by the guns. They were so beautiful. He thought of the hours it took someone to make them. Afterwards we went to McDonald's. Everyone liked that part.

Keith was working in the kitchen (as usual). I went in to talk to him for a few minutes and he serenaded me with the theme music from "Rawhide," the lyrics suitably altered: "Rowland, Rowland, Rowland, etc." Typical Keith. One of the tenants I was escorting wanted him to save her a steak (he'd done them on the barbecue that night). Keith agreed. On the way upstairs she reminded him that he was supposed to take her shopping on Monday. Shopping with Keith was one of their great joys, and mine too. She also reminded him that she wanted to buy some underwear at Wal-Mart. When I told her she should get them at Dollarama, where I got mine, Keith said that was why every time I farted I blew out the seat of my

pants. More typical Keith. Keith had the worst gas of anyone I know.

Keith also had a lot of problems. I knew he was having a hard time. I know that he and his wife had recently come through a lot of financial difficulties. I know that his parents were ill, and I know that he was ill himself, with chronic pain. I know too that he had a very hard job, with tenants and staff alike making a lot of physical and emotional demands on him. Keith was always the one to do extra work, to be extra kind and solicitous.

I only had one quarrel with Keith, and naturally it was a bad one. I still feel bad about it. Keith could be stubborn, and so could I. Now I think I have another, even more unreasonable of me, which is that he didn't say good-bye. We had one conversation about suicide, which is when he told me he had a little gun. I told him if he ever really felt that way, to come to tell me and I'd go with him. Maybe that's why. He probably had very different things on his mind.

Keith was wonderful. Sometimes there's nothing like stating the obvious.

*

Amanda knew how to cope. It was Jonathan Swift's perception that true happiness consisted of being perpetually self-deceived. I suppose that was the principal difference between the way we deceived ourselves and others did. Our delusions often made us happy. Other peoples' deceptions almost always made us miserable.

This reminds me of one of Keith's remarks about a month before he died. He had just got back from shopping. I think I must have been doing the manager's shift. I was helping Keith carry bins of groceries from the trunk of his Saturn into the pantry. Huey was helping too, for two dollars. Something was making him laugh, or rather he was making himself laugh at something that had been said to him. It was a forced

braying laugh, with his big mouth open and his head tilted way back. I mocked him by laughing the same way, and Keith joined in. Huey kept laughing, not getting it, developmentally delayed. Would he ever catch up?

I explained that we were mocking him because he sounded phony. Keith turned to me and said with surprising bitterness, “There are a lot of phony people in the world, Jon.” That would explain why we're so miserable.

*

The manager said Amanda would incorporate Keith's death into her delusions. She said the Pakis had him down in Pakistan. They were making a new Keith. Later she saw him in the cars driving by on Thing Street. He had joined the others who peopled her delusions, the Huberts and Kellys who so far as we knew never existed. He was with the blacks.

When I told Poindexter what she'd said, he nodded confidently. He was always the boy genius, although he was thirty years old and until recently still lived at home. She'd worked with Keith all the time in the kitchen program. Now she was fucked.

She was self-deceived. She was delusional and she was happy.

*

The first time I remember seeing Keith he was standing beside his car in front of the House next door. It must have been payday. He was holding a red carton of cigarettes. I'd get used to his Du Maurier King-Size Ultra-Lites. It might have been another time, but I believe I watched him a few moments later as he climbed up the front steps and paused on the porch before entering. By then he had one of the cigarettes between his thin lips. He was wearing shorts. His legs were thin. The rest of his clothing consisted of an open shirt with the sleeves

rolled up, a T-shirt, and running shoes. It would become as familiar as the cigarettes. He was at least 6'3", with large hands and feet that reminded me of a stick-man. He had a sensitive face, a finely shaped head. His light brown hair needed trimming.

He seemed at once young and old, athletic and frail. There was something troubling about his arms and legs. There was a suggestion of gauntness and of pain. "That wouldn't be because of this enormous brace I'm wearing on my left leg, now would it?" Keith asked me once, when I said he looked uncomfortable. I tried to sympathize, but he wasn't always willing to accept pity. He'd been through a bad accident. I couldn't see that day more than two years ago, partly because it was still early summer. In hot weather when he wore sandals, I saw that he'd also lost his left big toe.

Among others pieces of useless information, I told him that I bought my shoes second hand. One day when we were working in the kitchen I mentioned that I got athlete's foot after I started to jog. He thanked me for that information too. It wasn't on my curriculum vitae. He said the second-hand shoes probably had more to do with it. He took care of his feet. He just didn't have that much of them left.

The inside of his gaunt left arm was scared where the bone had burst through the skin from elbow to wrist as he clenched the steering wheel that nearly crushed him to death. He was a man of many hurts. He suffered from chronic pain.

*

Just a few days ago I'd sat in on a meeting with Keith, the manager, and Manon's team. The team was comprised of half a dozen men and women employed by the mental hospital to help Manon adjust to life in the community. That was how they described being a tenant. We were the community. Most tenants understandably preferred to remain in their rooms. Certainly Manon did, or she would run to the opposite extreme. Literally she would run away. Poindexter was

terrified she'd be run over on his shift. He'd have to write a report. Despite its promising name (it was called an "impact team”) Manon’s team was to impact what we were to community. In other words it had no impact at all. Its members, all six of them, took turns going up the dark-varnished stairs three or four timed a day, only to tap politely on her door before turning away when she invariably refused to answer. Walking in was unthinkable. So far as they knew she was already dead of starvation and rotting. In reality her uncle had deposited a lot of snacks the last time he visited her, only a few days ago. She wasn't starving though she wasn't well nourished either. I knew because, being more concerned about issues of responsibility than manners, I used my master key to let myself in and take a look. The immediate problem was hygiene. Manon was having her period and her bedding was soaked with menstrual blood. I remember seeing the directions for operating the remote that Keith had considerately written down on a "post-it" note and taped to the front of the TV for Manon to use. He'd also put a note in the common log warning Bobby Martinette not to shut it off at night when he did his rounds. It was her only pleasure. The purpose of the meeting was to decide what if anything could be done to enable Manon to stay. Otherwise she'd end up back in the hospital or, after they totally gave up on her, in an old age home from which she wouldn’t even be able to run away. The manager asked me to attend because, he said, I was their best note-taker. I believe that was an understatement.

*

Poindexter was fucked-up. He was a young black man with an anger management problem. He acted younger than he looked, but he looked his age. He was thirty. He had worked out a lot when he wanted to be a cop but now his six-foot frame was getting fat. He had worked as a security guard and he tended to approach support work as the same thing. He considered himself an “alpha” male. His temper and physical aggressiveness helped him to quell the occasional difficult tenant. They were a liability when it came to nearly everything else.

He was also a public enemy. He acquired that status after he dislocated the shoulder of a motorist who'd called him stupid. He'd just rammed the man's car, although it had been the man's own fault for suddenly stopping on the highway. He hadn't cared too much about the accident, but being called stupid enraged him. He had paid his way through years of college, attending full-time classes while working as a security guard in banks and as a laborer in his father's garage. He said grabbing the man was like aiming at him down the barrel of a gun. He relished the moment. Slugging him was like firing. Now he had to attend an anger-management class run by a so-called psychologist who hadn't taken any more courses than himself.

*

Jimmy rarely came to the office for his medication. A worker would bring it to him, the pills in a red plastic dosette in one hand, the water in a little paper cup in the other. Some workers preferred to remove the pills from the dosette and put them in a paper cup. They could then carry two cups in one hand, the plastic water pitcher in the other, and do two tenants' “meds” in one trip. When the worker climbed up the dark-varnished stairs to the second floor, and knocked on Jimmy's door, he was usually greeted with threats and abuse. Jimmy would say “I got a knife” and “I'm gonna off you.”

A part-time relief worker, Vito, whom I nicknamed Svengali, got very emotional about this. According to him, when confronted this way he reacted by inviting Jimmy to try. Vito would later get rid of Jimmy, over an alleged rape attempt that almost certainly was a cigarette deal gone bad, and a frame-up.

*

Vito usually parked his VW station wagon in front of the House. I remember watching for it when he was late for work.

Keith Died This Weekend

He was often late. Poindexter said he was depressed about his life. He didn't really want to get up at all. He'd also started a new job as manager at another group home. He was probably tired. Poindexter said he was more likely insecure. He lacked self-confidence. He figured he'd fail at his new job. He was probably right.

Sometimes Vito parked in front of the manse. It was then a group home run by the church that operated the apartment building on the corner. Vito's girlfriend worked there. It was the same population. Most of the guests were from the apartment building or the House. Occasionally some do-good organization used the premises at night. Alcoholics Anonymous was crashed by Lois and some of the other tenants. They helped themselves to the free coffee and donuts.

*

The Great Svengali haunted the watering holes of Europe.... From Baden-Baden to Lourdes he impersonated maitre'ds.... Unctuously fawning over Western Civilization, he smudged it with his greasy white-toweled forearm.... The Alps were less Swiss-looking after he'd served lunch.... The chalets looked run down.... Even the cuckoos were tardy....

Waiting was the perfect front for his forays on English women.... He loved that Lady Di look.... He ogled a fat cow sprawling in a torn chair in the crummy front office.... Imagining her in the sparkling tiara of the Duchess of Ormond.... Thinking she's more than a lousy Duchess.... She's the Princess of Wales and he's her randy big-eared Prince....

He was so slimy and disgusting.... At first Johnny thought he was a born-again Christian.... Maybe he wasn't a Christian at all.... Maybe he was a Catholic or worse an Anglican.... Or an ex-Prime Minister.... The infamous Cretin deserved to work in a Parkdale Psychome.... He deserved to live in one.... As if he loved poor people so much he chose to live with them even if it killed him.... They certainly would....

The black floor-length frock-coat with genuine imitation beaver fur train... The killer pince-nez currently adopted by hard-core rap artists emulous of genuine thuggery and its perquisites.... The mincing roman casuistry that mimed morality.... That pilloried homosexuals but connived at many a rascally jesuitical pederast.

He made periodic visitations.... Swooping on the protestant manse at Thing and Dung.... The receptionist had that delicate pink complexion he craved.... It was like the lining of a conch....

*

Vito's girlfriend drove a VW too. It was a classic yellow “bug.” It was very expensive. The girlfriend was very Anglo Saxon, tall with long blond hair. I met her at one of the two poker games I attended with staff. This was at the house that she and Vito shared. I remember that she hovered briefly over our table in the back yard. She indignantly refused to bring Vito something from the kitchen when he asked her to. She was very severe.

*

Svengali obviously had it on for her.... Plastic anglo cupie-doll.... Pink complexion.... Not a hair out of place.... The duchesses the watering-holes the Swiss chalets the ultramontane airs were camouflage for ambuscades on the pretentious pink and white womanhood he longed to puncture with his great swarthy tool....

*

One night in the smoking lounge I heard Amanda, Jimmy's alleged victim, describe in detail what had happened. She'd given him a blowjob for a pack of cigarettes, at least I hope it

was a pack. After the blowjob he went to the store with the cigarette money, but came back with something else, probably potato chips. Amanda decided she'd been “screwed,” and cried “Rape!” Vito was naïve enough to believe her, and called the police. No one else believed her, but everyone supported her, because by then they wanted to get rid of Jimmy.

*

Johnny heard the commotion.... Svengali screaming at Bugsy Lothario that he'd garnish his welfare check if he so much as looked at one of their fair female guests again.... Let alone attempted to rape at knifepoint as he'd just done.... Moreover he'd send him up the river into one of those homo-infested schools of criminology where he (Svengali) hoped some big black buck would bugger his behind so hard he'd know how it felt to be forced.... Jug jug tu-wit too-woo....

Felicity sobbed in the background over what was more likely lost revenue than lost virginity.... Sure sure she was a virgin.... We all knew that she'd do anything for a cigarette.... Including scream rape rape and call the cops if she didn't get one that had been promised her in exchange for her precious pasty jewel....

Svengali was a sucker or maybe he liked the idea of the cops busting another pervert besides himself....

*

The only worker who ever expressed any pity for Jimmy was Keith. Every now and then he'd see Jimmy marching or staggering along the sidewalk, depending on his condition. He told me once what a sad case Jimmy's was. He'd been a professional engineer of some sort, married, and a father. However, even after acute mental illness, he'd refuse to take his medication, although there was medicine available to him

that would have helped. He'd "escalate," as we said, and get evicted from one group home, or "stupid boarding home," as Amanda used to say, to another.

One evening Jimmy came down to the office at medication time and gave Poindexter the finger. Poindexter threw him out the door and down the hall, so violently he dislocated Jimmy's shoulder.

*

Keith, Angel and I were sitting in the office. It must have been late May in 2003, about two weeks after I started. The manager hadn't figured out how to fire the cook yet.

The cook was Jamaican. Despite his total incompetence, he'd cry racism if he were fired outright. Eventually he'd be "let go" as a result of "restructuring." In reality he'd be fired, and everyone else would have to do part of his job. Keith would do most of it. He would go shopping at the "No Frills" at least once a week. I went with him a few times, in his little car. His hand bumped my knee when he used the shift. He smoked, and asked me if I wouldn't mind rolling down the window. He said he was sweating like a pig. It was partly because he was physically weak. He never got enough sleep.

I don't think we can overestimate the effect of this on Keith. It is troubling why, with a conspicuous disability and suffering from chronic pain, Keith was ever allowed to do as much as he did. Yet it was imposed on him, while others were exempt.

Keith did virtually all of the cleaning and a great deal of the cooking. To maintain the ruse, we couldn't hire a cook so Keith effectively became the cook, and the shopper too. He was already a support worker (of course), and a cleaner (by default). With bad knees, a brace, and chronic pain, Keith was the one who had to lug around heavy boxes of groceries, once or twice a week.

On top of everything else, this made unreasonable physical

demands on him. After he started this additional work, he had more trouble sleeping, and more trouble with pain. After returning from a shopping trip it was routine for him to reach for the painkillers on the mantle. It is appalling that, in a workplace organized around accommodating people with mental illness, Keith's obvious physical disabilities were barely even acknowledged let alone addressed.

One cannot overestimate the effect that Keith's physical pain had on him. It made it impossible for him to sleep. This seriously undermined his morale, as well as his health. This in turn aggravated the impact of his personal problems, his financial worries, his sick parents, etc.

The really appalling thing is that, thanks (alas) to bad management, nearly everyone else was allowed to slack off. The manager did no cleaning, little cooking, and I'm afraid not even very much managing. Bobby Martinette did virtually nothing at night except make a few rather bad sandwiches. Bobby was allowed to opt out of cleaning months ago, after a feud with Leroy. Leroy never cleaned anything either, though he would at least occasionally cook something between 4 and midnight. The relief staff never cleaned anything, and were never asked to, although they were overstaffed on the weekend, when there was virtually nothing to do and there were two people on duty between 2 and 4 P.M.

Keith eventually got half a dozen purple bins that he used instead of boxes. The boxes didn't fit very well in the trunk of the Saturn and made a lot of extra garbage every week. Lawrence had to work all the harder, breaking them down and tying them up to go onto the curb. I was often the one to help him out, wrapping the lengths of twine around the large boxes that he had flattened out. The small Kraft dinner boxes always slipped out. They were a pain in the ass. Lawrence would press a thumb on the knot and hold it till I finished tying.

I enjoyed the shopping, pushing the cart while Keith foraged ahead for the things he knew by heart. It was like being married. This went on till one of the cleaners, a black woman who lived in another House, made fun of the arrangement.

Degeneration House

From then on Keith only took tenants. The “kitchen program” started up, and they got paid for it.

He naturally tended to buy for the House what he himself liked to eat. I was touched that, working as hard as he was, he probably couldn't afford to buy the same things for himself. This I inferred from the way he'd grab a bite just before going home or right after arriving at work. He was allowed to do so. The company budgeted food for staff, so the haste couldn't be attributed to furtiveness. He was hungry.

He bought chicken strips, "Delicio" brand pizzas, good quality fish (usually haddock), plenty of fries. He was English. He made himself what he called "chip butts." They were just sandwiches, french fries between two slices of buttered white bread. Once for a "treat" he made me a drink flavoured with "Ribena" syrup.

Once he bought pineapples and sliced them on the wooden island in the kitchen. I took one and cut it into it without first removing the tough skin. He watched me for a moment, then he said “You don’t know what you’re doing, do you.” I bought pineapples in cans. He showed me how to slice fresh ones.

I saved the shopping list that he made for me before he went on his last vacation. Under "Often Used Staples" he listed such items as "bread, milk, salad fixens, fruit, potatoes, juice (breakfast)." He added "2-4 quick meals for weekend staff." Then he was distracted, because he wrote a dash but never wrote down the name of the next item beside it.

Keith died Sunday morning. I lasted through Wednesday but I was failing. The worst part of it was going shopping for the first time since Keith’s death. It nauseated me. This was an activity that I associated with Keith. Identified is a better word. We were unable to put it off any longer and still feed the tenants. Neither the manager nor I even knew to drive.

Keith Died This Weekend

We had to enlist the services of one of the caseworkers from head office. He was very nice, very Anglican, what most people call a "nice guy." He was fifty, balding, and bearded. He wore half-glasses around his neck on a chain. He was the worst possible replacement for Keith, who was young and atheistic and would always be. He was a bad shopping partner for me.

The purple bins were on the shelf in the pantry. They hadn't been disturbed since Keith replaced them Friday afternoon.

*

This afternoon we still had time to sit around and talk to the tenants. Angel was with us. Huey came in for a few minutes with his weights. He said he'd done twenty flexes. He handed the set to Keith. He started on a set of twenty but deliberately slowed down at the thirteenth flex. He only made it to seventeen. He passed the weights back to Huey, exhausted. Huey smiled. He was never sure he wasn't being tricked. Holding the dumb-bells with one hand, with the other he pulled the sleeve of his sports shirt up over his fleshy bicep. “Feel,” he commanded. “Muscle.” Keith touched it gently, holding the door for him to go. “Wow,” he said. “Keith,” Huey began, “Why is everybody picking on me.” “Quit stalling,” he said. “They're staring at me. Am I ugly?” “You're cute as a button.” He touched the end of Huey's big nose. “Now go.” Huey lurched off down the hall, blowing his brains out with his finger.

Angel was deluded that she had a factory job. I think it might have had some basis in the volunteering she did in the garden at Scalding Court. She wanted me to do up her schedule. We spent a lot of time at the little round table just filling in the days of the week. Keith was getting ready to go. He usually made a trip to the staff washroom, carrying a baggie with a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste wrapped inside it. He said it made him feel fresher, helped him stay awake on the long

drive home.

Keith had to leave a few minutes early to make a doctor’s appointment. It had something to do with his knees. That, and the fact that it was getting warm, prompted him to get into shorts. I remember him coming back to Angel and me after changing. “How do I look?” he asked her, smiling. She laughed. I don’t remember that she said anything.

I thought he looked great. He was lanky, with beautiful long legs that were slightly too thin. They were lightly covered with blond hair that only showed up in sunlight. Otherwise they looked smooth. The puffiness around his kneees, like the bandage under the brace and the heavy black brace itself, only made him more attractive. Of course, I’m speaking for myself. At the time I didn’t say anything either.

I noticed that he was still wearing the black socks that he’d worn under the jeans. “Black socks,” I said. “They make look like a banker taking the afternoon off. Pretty nerdy.” He agreed. He returned to the main floor washroom. When he got back his feet were bare in his running shoes and he carried the socks in his hand. He had crazy ankles. He stuffed the socks into his “Roots” bag. “Better?” he asked. This time Angel said “Yes.”

Just before going downstairs, baggie in hand, Keith stood over us to see what we were doing. He read off the days of the week, pausing before “Thursday,” mocking our painstaking. Sometimes ours was a simple job, helping a retarded schizophrenic woman remember the days of the week for a schedule for a non-existent factory-job.

*

Some nights he went home after cooking one of his specialty dishes and made Kraft dinner. His special dishes were tacos, pirogies with bacon, chicken fajitas. These were the same dishes he made for his wife, when he had the energy. She didn't seem to do much cooking. So she was lazy too,

Poindexter said after Keith's suicide. Only it wasn't laziness.

Keith said it was hard to come home to it after dealing with mental illness all day at work. He never knew what to expect. Some nights he'd find her crying in the middle of the living-room floor. She'd have wasted the whole day preparing some sort of high-tech digital presentation for a job in a field that didn't have any jobs. Dinner wouldn't be ready and she'd get so distraught thinking about it and the mess the house was in that she wouldn't be able to help him make anything either.

*

All yesterday evening the smoke alarm went off every three minutes in the House. Leroy was cooking a roast. He usually started it late because he was on his cell-phone for half the shift. Woe to the tenant who bothered him for a late supper or sullied a dish.

He cooked the roast his way. Because he started late he had to catch up. He caught up by putting it in on high around eight o'clock after he'd soused it with a whole bottle of Bovril. He wouldn't look at it again till it was "done" (burnt) at eleven P.M. Whether it was really done or not was irrelevant. He was done with it. That was all that mattered so far as he was concerned. At eleven-thirty he had to wash whatever dishes he'd been unable to avoid using and compose himself for the night guy, Bobby Martinette, whom he hated. Between eight and eleven-thirty the smoke alarm would sound continually, detecting the burning roast. He didn't care.

I felt like going into the House and moistening the roast myself. It had gone dry.

*

I have four pictures of Keith. I took the first two in October of 2003, almost exactly a year before his suicide. They show him in his usual summer attire: a shirt over a T-shirt, short pants,

"New Balance" running shoes, white gym socks. By co-incidence that was the last time Keith wore shorts that year. The weather turned cold the very next day and stayed cold till spring.

In the first of these two pictures Keith posed for me. He picked up the bin that he used to carry groceries when he went shopping. I suppose he wanted me to photograph him with things that went with the job. The shopping bin was as emblematic of his job as the plumber's snake was of mine. I thought the latter should be on my coat of arms, if I ever got one. I was always carrying it upstairs to unplug the tenants' toilets. Keith used to follow me in case I needed his experienced help. He'd watch as I attacked the load of reeking shit. He once observed that everyone's smelled the same. Only theirs was worse because of all the meds. Now he stood sideways, in front of the door. He raised the arm that wasn't holding anything and waved his hand as if he were lecturing someone. I shot the picture.

In the second picture he faces the camera. He faces me. His expression is friendly. This is my favorite picture. There is a story behind these pictures. They were Keith's way of paying me back for three packs of cigs that I'd just given him. I'd stuffed them into his "Roots" bag when he was out of the office.

Of course there was another story behind his needing cigarettes and not being able to buy them for himself. That probably accounts for his somber appearance in the second set of pictures. I took these at Christmas time, without his permission. He hated them. He looks very glum while stringing little lights on the House tree. It should have been a happy task. Money had everything to do with it. He hated Christmas because he thought it was all to do with money. At least that one was his last.

*

I helped Keith out with more than just cigarettes. At least I

thought I was helping him. Who knows? Perhaps the only thing I know is that I tried. I could have done more. I was limited by fear of giving offence. A terrible inhibition. When I gave him something and he chided me for it, telling me that I had to stop, I insisted that he take it, as long as he wasn't angry. I didn't mind if he was slightly embarassed, as long as he wasn't angry. He assured me he wasn't. It wasn't even an issue.

One Friday afternoon when we were working in the kitchen I gave him fifty dollars. I laid the bill on the counter. It was pink, so he he noticed it. I said it was for him. At first he wouldn't take it. He told me to pick it up before it got lost. I could tell he wanted it. I told him to buy himself something for the weekend. He grinned and put it in his pocket. Or was it a grimace?

He stayed late that shift and for some reason started to reminisce about Grant, a worker who had died in his sleep a few months ago. He said Grant stayed late with him a lot. It was as if he didn't want to go home. He was middle-aged, married, with children. Keith said it wasn't uncommon. I drew the obvious implication.

*

He was like an elder brother. I was the younger, inexperienced sibbling. If I had an extra cheese sandwich in the kitchen (I made them out of our horrible "Wonder" bread and "plastic" processed cheese slices), he'd chide me, "Young man, that's your second cheese sandwich today." Just as he taught me how to slice a pineapplel, he taught me that when you made grilled cheese sandwiches healthy brown bread "just wouldn't do." You had to use white. He'd see me reaching for the loaf of whole wheat bread and say "You don't know what you're doing, do you." I was 10 years older than Keith. Now that he's killed himself we'll only grow farther apart. He appears fixed in time and place. I'm still moving, but I'm not conscious of doing anything. I let it happen.

*

The manager made himself hoarse telling the tenants one after another that Keith was dead. They took it very well. Abe came to the office with his laundry in a green garbage bag. He wanted some of the soap powder that Katrina put in little Baggies as an excuse for being in the office early in the morning. His laundry consisted of a pair of jeans. He would guard them in the laundry room all afternoon. No one in his right mind would steal them. Maybe that was why. The manager invited him into the office and asked him to sit in one of the crummy chairs reserved for tenants. Some of the staff were afraid of picking up scabies or other bugs by sitting in a chair that a tenant had just sat in. Getting the tenants to clean up was out of the question. They were untouchables.

After the manager told him Abe said it was terrible. He asked how it had happened. The manager lied. He said no one knew. They'd found him dead in bed. He was afraid the tenants wouldn't be able to take the fact of his suicide. Yet they lived such harsh lives. Abe was paranoid and lived in a state of imminent destruction. He was preoccupied with conspiracies. Amanda was always talking about her other bodies. I think she thought she was Lady Di. She was always talking about how her lips moved when she saw her in the wrecked Mercedes on TV. She wasn't killed. She was murdered. There were mummy babies under the bed and werewolves at the window. So it went. What was another suicide to them? On his way out Abe apologized for not wearing socks for Paddy's announcement. I'd noticed when he was sitting opposite me that his feet were bare in his dirty sneakers. That was on his mind. The announcement of Keith's death was an occasion. He hadn't been dressed for it.

*

I remember my first shift. I'd had a couple of training shifts with Bobby Martinette and Keith. Bobby had been a strange unnerving experience. He obviously suffered from what I 'd

soon learn to call O.C.D. or "obsessive compulsive disorder." I'll have more to say about it later. I'm convinced that it and a lot of things like it contributed to Keith’s suicide.

I remember one thing right now about Bobby and his training. He insisted that the apple juice go into the clear pitcher and the orange juice into the blue one. This "arrangement" came up about a year later when I inadvertently violated it. I'd been working the 4 to midnight shift. As I usually did, after the manager got rid of the cook, I prepared a roast in our dysfunctional oven. Unfortunately I mixed the gravy in the blue pitcher, the one Bobby reserved for orange juice. During shift change I'd asked him to let the roast cook for an hour longer after he came on duty. I'd left the gravy, in the blue pitcher, on the counter. When he saw it he must have flown into a rage. He left an angry highlighted note in the common log, addressed to part-time staff from full-time staff (himself), never to use the blue pitcher for anything except orange juice. He had a lot of similar ticks. They ranged from mildly irritating to downright disgusting. He could be mean and bullying.

Keith trained me the next night. I think Bobby simply didn't like me. He probably told the manager I wouldn't make it. Keith must have decided to give me a chance. At any rate when I went in at midnight I was surprised to find him in the office. He was talking to Leroy, who (of course) was going off duty. He almost never worked nights. He'd brought in extra supplies of liquorice twists and hard candy, as well as his usual Du Maurier Extra Lites. He smiled at me from his chair by the computer, as if to say he was doing this for me. He was such a nice man.

I know I digress, but this book is about Keith. There are a number of things I remember about that night. I remember him sitting in the office with me and slowly rolling his left pant-leg up over the brace in order to adjust it. I remember following behind him as he did rounds. Every hour he led the way around the house up and down four flights of stairs from basement to third floor. It must have bothered his knees a lot.

I remember his sense of humour. He'd been telling me to check that all the windows were locked. He stopped at a window in the rear stairwell and picked up a baggie that had probably contained a cookie. "Crack cocaine," he muttered.

The next night I worked alone. Angel, Lois and Amanda were like sharks that smelled fresh blood. It was the manager's metaphor for the initiation of a new relief person. They went through a lot of us. They were also a trio of harpies. During the day they were only supposed to come for a cigarette, but only on the hour. Amanda didn't even have any cigs. After midnight they weren't supposed to come at all. When I said so, Angel told me that it had been changed. The manager said so. It was the rule. I was so naïve that I almost believed her.

I saw Lois looking at her with that sidelong expression of hers that meant something was up. Angel was scamming. Lois was usually scamming herself. She was what Poindexter called a “predator.” She was also a lone hunter. She wasn't sure she wanted to be in on Angel's ruse. She usually got whatever Angel got anyway. She was short and slight with a stoop that gave her a slinking air. She was always repeating “I'm a pretty girl” but she was actually very ugly. She had long dark hair that was often lousy. She wore glasses one lens of which was either taped or falling out. Her teeth were very bad. There was a large hole in one of her front molars. No doubt her appetite for sugary coffee had something to do with it. The first thing she did in the morning was hit the big urn in the basement. She'd slop a trail of coffee all the way to the smoking lounge. She was a pig.

“I'm wise,” she told me outside the office. That's good, I said. “Maybe you should go to bed.” “Can't I stay up if I want to? I'm a big girl.”

They came back a few minutes later. When I opened the office door, Amanda screamed and pointed under the round table. “My head! It came off my other body.” I couldn't help looking in the direction of her finger. Angel looked too, with a mild expression. Lois just kept smoking. I assured her there was nothing there. “I'm scared,” she said, in a hoarse voice.

“Wa-a-a-a-h,” Lois said. She'd decided to get in on it.

*

One evening I caught Amanda sobbing in the dining room. She was sitting alone at one of the long white plastic tables that we cleaned after every meal with the bleach rag. There was always one in the bucket of bleach on top of the tenants' fridge.

The fridge wasn't used for much else. Many of the tenants didn't eat at meal times. Some of them hardly ate anything at all. I'd cook a roast, slice it on the machine in the kitchen, and serve it with vegetables, mashed potatoes and gravy. The tenants loved gravy. I'd open the fridge and find half a dozen plates of uneaten meat. I think some of them couldn't eat it because of their rotten teeth. That was why they liked the peanut butter cookies I baked after midnight. They were soft. Keith liked them too, not because his teeth were bad. He had a sweet tooth. By midnight I'd have to throw out all the left-overs. Otherwise Bobby would complain to the manager about the way I'd left the kitchen. He'd even photograph it, with the polaroid we used to photograph the tenants, and show the pictures to our director at Head Office. Tut, tut. The manager always phoned Bobby after midnight. They were "buddies." That was what he called everyone to his face. Leroy called him "Buddy" behind his back.

I twisted the bleach rag over the bucket on top of the fridge and started to wipe Amanda's table. It didn't need it. I'd already wiped it once when I cleaned up right after supper. It was just a way to break the ice, and get her to lift her head up. The bleach stank. It smelled like burnt skin. I burnt myself with it once, cleaning the back stairs with my bare hands.

It worked She slowly raised her head. I asked her what was wrong. She said it was Lawrence. He loved Kelly. He was throwing her aside for Kelly, a figment of her imagination. Maybe Swift was wrong, if one's own delusions could betray one thus. When I suggested that it didn't matter, Kelly was a

tramp, he could have her if that was what he wanted, Amanda immediately recovered. I'm undecided about Swift.

When she got up to go upstairs, Jethro was mopping the floor. He hadn't put up his warning sign, because (as usual) Bobby had put it away. She marched toward the stairs, thinking about Kelly, and slipped. I heard her broad bacl flop against the floor like a sack of flour. I bent down. She hadn't hit her head.

She saw me and started to moan. I offered to help her get up, but she said she didn't want to look. She knew there was blood all over. She was probably brain-damaged. I said I didn't think so, but invited her to discuss it with me in the office. I'd give her a couple of cigarettes. F-f-free? She felt better already.

*

I came to know the routines of the House very well. They certainly weren't enough, but they represented a starting point. I mean that literally, because I wrote my rotines down and printed them out on a word processor, under the heading "Basic Routines." I put them on a clipboard and carried them around for months, although after the first week I rarely if ever looked at them. They were symbolic. I knew that as long as I adhered to them I couldn't backslide as all of the others had, except Keith. I also knew that because of their painfully obvious inadeqacy every time I referred to them they served as a reminder to do more. They inspired me. Keith noticed my clipboard and observed that I seemed really enthusiastic about the job. The manager noticed it too. He was surprised that I was stil carrying it around.

*

I made most of the notes during that first training shift with Bobby. On reviewing them now I realize that Bobby had backslid from them quite a bit himself, even in the brief time I

was there. Before I would have thought that such things as rules, guidelines, routine, and procedures would have been dearly loved and religiously followed by men as anal and obsessive as Bobby was. Now I realize that they usually stand in the way of such people.

The very first thing I was supposed to do was "come in a few minutes early for shift change." That meant coming in every night at a quarter to midnight. Bobby almost never came in early, mainly because he hated Leroy, the man he usually relieved. He hated the idea of working a few minutes extra for Leroy, even if it was really for the House. He preferred to make Leroy stay late. Leroy hated him for that. They were much alike.

I always came to work fifteen minutes early. Other staff complained about it. I suppose they were afraid I'd walk in on them asleep with their feet up on a chair, or I'd make them look bad so they'd get fewer shifts. Instead of telling them to follow procedures, the Manager told me not to come in early any more. He said I'd been there long enough that it wasn't necessary. He criticized me for following procedures rather than criticize them for not. His style of "management" was self-saving.

I came in early. Otherwise shift change wouldn't happen.

*

Then I put on the set of relief keys. Full-time permanent staff were allowed to keep their own keys and even take them home. Bobby warned me not to hang it around my kneck. Someone could choke me with it. I usually tied it to a belt loop. If someone pulled it, it would just break off.

No one ever tried to strangle me with the relief keys. No one tried to steal them either. Why? They didn't unlock anything whose contents one would want to steal. They unlocked the kitchen and the pantry but staff were always leaving them open anyway, despite the faded warnings on the doors, not to

leave them "open and unattended." There was "pin money" in little yellow envelopes in amounts of one or two dollars in the filing cabinet in the office. In total it might have amounted to two hundred dollars. The cabinet also contained at least a week's worth of meds for each of the twenty schizophrenic tenants. It had no street value. If you were stupid enough to take it you would fall into a coma. Anyone could get into the office by kicking the door.

The black South African cleaner used to forget to return her keys after work. We'd be short a set of keys till she returned next week. I attached an enormous medallion, something from a very posh local athletic club, hoping she'd be reminded by its weight to remove them. She still took them home, though she must have looked conspicuous on the Thing Street car. Eventually the manager refused to loan her the keys at all. This was a great blow to her pride. She must have regarded the set of keys on its little ribbon as a chain of office like the Lord Mayor's of London's, only smaller. In revenge she made more trips than usual in and out of the office and the storage rooms. Each time I'd have to interrupt my supper preparations and go all the way upstairs and let her in. She wanted the keys back.

*

The next thing I had to do was change the tape in the video recorder on top of the filing cabinet where the meds were. That was for our security. Like the locks it didn't work. The tape was supposed to record what the cameras saw on the front porch and right outside the back door. Most of the time the lights were burnt out because Bobby and Leroy were fighting over whose job it was to change the bulb. Consequently the cameras saw nothing but darkness occasionally illuminated by the matches of tenants smoking on the steps. At other times they filmed events....

*

Keith Died This Weekend

Had the cameras been working they would have filmed innumerable cigarette breaks. Every hour or so Keith would invite the manager to join him in the smoking lounge or on the porch. When I wasn't working I often saw them there on my way in or out of the house next door. We'd say hello and I'd ask them how it was going. Later, if Keith was alone, he'd tease me about something or toss me his empty cigarette pack.

Minnie often sat on the top step and smoked. She was what Poindexter called "passive-agressive." She played the victim to get her way. Her squeaky little voice incensed Vito, who considered it beneath his dignity to work for people who didn't have any pride. Every time he heard that voice, usually begging for enough change to make a quarter so she could buy a cigarette, it reminded him that what he did was degrading.

It was a role. When she didn't get the change from Vito she'd walk out onto the sidewalk and solicit the passers by. She'd return with enough for a pack. She wouldn't buy a whole pack at once, but only two or three cigarettes. It was more controlling that way. She could bother us all day. She'd never come for her cigarettes on the hour but always a few minutes too late or too early. She'd track us down and interrupt whatever we were doing in the kitchen. She forced us to break our own rules just to get rid of her.

Once she had her cigarette she didn't seem to care. She'd take a few puffs and throw it away. It was an excuse for sitting on the front steps, breaking another rule. Keith warned her that if he caught her there he'd cut her off cigarettes for a whole day. Then he decided that he'd cut her off the "kitchen program." He wouldn't let her peal potatoes and make salad. Cutting her off cigarettes only meant she'd buy from the Koreans on the corner. Cutting her off “the program" meant she’d have no money to buy from anyone. She'd still get money. We were only, as we used to say, "slowing her down."

After Keith's death Minnie seems to be sitting on the steps more than ever. It's possible that I only notice it more. I'm sensitive about it. In the winter she had great salt stains on the seat of her pants. I told Keith she had a salty crack.

Yesterday she asked me for a cigarette. I said no. I mentioned that I'd noticed her sitting on the steps. I thought she was inconiderate. She tossed what was left of her cigarette, nearly all of it. "Sorry," she said. In a woman's normal speaking voice. I wish the camera could have caught it.

*

The camera could have caught worse things. Once Collin came back drunk from a bar frequented by pimps, hookers, and pushers. He had his discman on. He loved rap music. He was white, from a middle-class family. Every few months his father pulled up in an expensive sports car in front of the house and waited for Collin to come out. He never went in. It was too depressing. His mother wanted the doctor to be sure to give him lots of prosac before he came home for a visit. He was too depressed.

Collin hated Leroy. Leroy was a Jamaican black. He was loud and brusque. He would spill the "meds" he was offering a tenant, and shout at him as if it was the tenant's fault. I don't think Collin was a racist. He acted like people in the rap music he was always listening to. When they were angry with one another they called each other "Nigger." Collin was already high on whatever he'd been consuming at the local bar, as well as the music. When he saw Leroy, he got angry and called him "nigger."

I think Collin neglected to consider that the people in the rap music calling one another "nigger" were nearly all black. He resembled a typical white, middle-class American college kid. He had black hair, clear white skin, brown eyes. He was tall, handsome, and athletic. The nurse who worked at the house part-time couldn't forebear calling him "cutie." When Collin called Leroy "nigger" it wasn't tough talk from one of Leroy's own people. It was a broadside from the enemy.

Collin was probably bi-sexual. Once in the dining-room he asked me if I were married. I said no. He asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said no. He asked me if I had a boyfriend. I said

no. Finally he asked me if I wanted one. I said no, I was a loner. He hadn’t been nosy or insulting. He’d been sympathetic. It was all natural to him.

I heard him talking to Keith one evening. Collin was crouching by the garbage cans outside the office. Keith was bending over him. I had just emerged from the office where I'd been dispensing supper-time meds. Collin was angry. He said he just wanted to go home. He missed his family. He didn't like it here. Keith said he understood. He was sorry. There was nothing he could do. I thought I noticed genuine sympathy. From what I now know about Keith, it was.

He told me, I think in the course of our discussion about suicide, that he'd never been "that way." He'd had "reality problems." I'd already assumed that he took drugs for pleasure as well as pain. Maybe the "pleasure" was for pain too. Something had happened to Keith when he was a teenager. That was why he sometimes referred to himself as "high school Keith." He'd dropped out. From what I now know about Keith, his sympathy was real.

*

None of this really matters in terms of what the camera could have seen. I saw it, because I was watching from the porch next door. Leroy first tried to mollify Collin by telling him he was sorry he was angy, but he shouldn't take it out on others. After the racial epithet, he became more aggressive. Instead of getting off the porch himself, he told Collin to. He said he could take him. They "escalated," to use mental health-care jargon.

Suddenly Collin grabbed Leroy by the neck. Leroy just had time to throw me the cell-phone before Collin hurled him off the porch and pumelled him on the ground. I called the police but it was all over in a few seconds. Leroy got away, or Collin released him. I'm not sure what happened because I was on the phone. I saw Collin walk back into the house.

Leroy was in shock. The police were useless. They became hostile when I wouldn't give them my date of birth. I hadn't done anything wrong except call the police. I explained that I worked there. I lived next door. I'd been standing on my porch. I saw it all. The lead cop glanced over his shoulder at my house. "You live next door to this?"

When I refused to give them Collin's file the lead cop suggested I review my training. I thought of suggesting that he review his own, especially the part under neighbourhood policing. Instead I said I was sorry but, according to my training, for reasons of confidentiality I couldn't release the tenant't file without a "Form 14." They knew that. The second cop looked worried for his colleague, as if he thought he'd lost face and didn't know how to recover it.

Out of reach of the non-recording cameras I talked to Collin about what had happened. He said he guessed he'd really messed up this time. Now he'd never get to go home.

The police joined us a few minutes later. The lead cop interrogated Collin quite agressively about drugs. Collin hadn't taken any street drugs lately. He was on antpsychotic medicatiion. The cop offered his opinion that Collin's "meds" needed adjustment. I said it had just been done, after a two week re-assessment....

I gave him the name of Collin's doctor and some information about his "meds." When I told them that Collin had been diagnosed with schizophrenia the lead cop fatuously wanted to know "which subtype." If he'd known anything about it he'd have known that such things didn't matter. They changed from one assessment to the next.

The cops took Collin away in hand-cuffs, although it was clear that he'd spent his rage. I was glad I hadn't told them that he'd been diagnosed with "schizophrenia-paranoid subtype."

I wondered what the camera had caught of this event. The anger? The inept handling? The needless violence? The bad policing? The ignorance? The prejudice? The waste?

The cops returned to the house a few minutes later. The lead cop was gloating and the second was filled with admiration. The lead explained that Collin would be back in an hour. He only needed a little anger management. They turned and left the house.

They'd obviouly just dropped him off at St. Joe's without telling anyone what he'd done. I immediately got on the phone and tried to deal with the doctor who'd released him. At first he wouldn't even give me his name, although he wanted all kinds of infomation from me, which I wasn't allowed or even qualified to release. The "meds" information on the back of Collin’s dosette was out of date any way. When I told him what Collin had done he said people beat up people in bars every day and they didn't get committed. I wanted to say that I wasn't talking about the general population. This man had a mental illness and he was a doctor. But by then Collin was "acting out" with them too and it was a different story. I never saw him again.

Later that morning I tried to view the tape but it was illegible.

*

The next item on my list of basic routines was the T.V. lounge. Bobby Martinette always shut it down and kicked everybody out at midnight. When I showed that to Keith he said it was wrong. The tenants had the right to watch T.V. This was their home. I never locked the T.V. lounge. I never removed the item from the list either. It was a starting point.

Shortly after midnight I was supposed to do a round. I had to make sure there were no guests malingering in the tenant's rooms. Luigi was apt to have a prostitute. He was more apt to be having sex with another tenant. He was certain to be smoking in his room, which was also forbidden. During rounds I would clutch the relief keys that hung from the ribbon dangling from my belt loop. I didn't want them to rattle. They made me feel like a cat with a bell on its collar, unable to

catch anything. I'd walk softly as I approached Luigi's door and very quietly insert the master key into his lock. Then I'd tap on his door and enter immediately without waiting for permission. I wanted to catch him.

Sometimes Amanda was there. After they got used to me, Luigi would just keep smoking. Amanda would assure me that they weren't having sex. She was a virgin.

I also had to check the balconies. I'm not sure what for. It was something Bobby did. I was supposed to shut and lock all the doors and make sure the windows on the stairways were all locked. Abe always did that himself. He was "paranoid subtype." His wordly possessions consisted of a few pairs of jeans and some t-shirts. Nonetheless he would lock his door several times before leaving his room. He wouldn't let me sweep the floor unless he was there. He kept piles of old newspapers on an old coffee-table in his room. They were mainly classified sections. He was always looking for another room. He saved them, although he never looked at them except just before I made him throw them out. Then he would open every page, study it, and stuff it into a green garbage bag. It would take him all day to throw out the pile.

He thought he was a Mountie. Maybe he thought he was a support worker. Shortly before midnight he made his own rounds, locking every window and door, not once but thrice. Because I came a few minutes early, I'd hear him at it. If I tried to interrupt him, he'd pretend to be on his way to the toilet. If I asked him why he didn't use the one on his own floor, he'd say it was plugged. It usually was. Checking the toilets was also on my list....

*

It was 8:15 on a February moring. I had been on duty since midnight. Bertha had been a case worker at head office. It was hard to imagine anyone at head office as a case worker. They were all so out if touch. They wouldn't even have made good clients. Bertha hadn't been popular at head office. That

could have been a recommendation. She could have been better than they were. She was worse.

Bertha described them to me after the poker game that was her farewell party. I'd already met the executive director. I can describe her myself. She was an Australian. She said "yes, yes right" a lot, pronouncing it "royt." I heard her at the unofficial wake she and some other head office characters arranged for us. I think it was really to assuage their guilt. She was a socialite, a female suit. Otherwise she wouldn't have held her position. She "tut-tutted" a lot. Schizophrenia. What a waste, tut tut. She was the biggest waste herself.

Harry Parsons was our manager's manager. He was short, dark, stocky, bearded and bald. He dressed like a civil servant on summer vacation in the tundra circa 1950. His clothes looked comfortable but he was uneasy. He ran several company properties. They all bore his trademark low-functioning staff, bad morale and no discipline. The nursing home was typical. The company flagship, it was stupidly named "Queen's Retirement." No kind of queen would have retireed there. The building was owned by the mafia. The maintenance was contracted out to a mob of incompetents. Vito was impressed. Harry had to vacate it all of a sudden with thirty eldery schizophrenic tenants. They took up residence in a building in a remote gang-ridden suburb. It was run by psychopaths. One morning a female tenant screamed and vomited breakfast. There was bleech in her orange juice.

Quentin was the property manager. He reminded me of a British actor whose name I can't remember. The actor was a comedian with a moustache and a toothy grin. Quentin escorted prospective tenants around the property. He was sarcastic and fussy. I remember when he introduced me to Manon. I offered her my hand. She shied away. He said "Thank you, Jon." Tut, tut. He should have told me that she didn't like to shake hands. It was part of her cleanliness obsession.

Quentin was gay. The director was straight. Moreover she

was a woman. Nonetheless they were the Joan and Darby of Anomie House. Bertha said she found their co-dependency oppressive. It was one of the reasons why she left head office. I experiened it during the wake. Two land-rovers pulled up at the curb. In the office they appeared to be reading a dialogue from an old script they knew by heart. The director couldn't believe it. Keith! By his own hand. He was always so cheerful. Yes, Quentin said. He was charming. The manager sat with them trying to look sad but looking bored.

*

Bertha should have relieved me at 8 o'clock. She should have relieved me at fifteen minutes to 8. Instead of apologizing she went straight to the schedule that the manager had taped to the cupboard above the cupboard. She squealed that she didn't have enough hours. She needed more shifts. Then she immediately calmed down. She said she'd talk to Paddy. He'd make it right.

Then she lowered her immense bulk into Keith's chair beside the computer. I started to do shift change. At almost every name, she said that tenant shouldn't even be there. He or she wasn't truly mentally ill. He or she was developmentally delayed. Poindexter said Bertha had Downes Syndrome. Her features were distinctly Mongoloid. She should talk. She was trying to show me what a great case worker she was. I was impressed.

*

The manager lived in Best Lodge. It was a high-rise being run into the ground by the worthless crackhead scions of Boris Ulyanov Fillmore, Vaslav and Serge. It was like the United Nations under terrorist attack with all the interpreters on strike. The front door was bashed in. Like an old man's bloody dentures after somebody kicked him in the mouth.

Moving vans full of fertilizer pulled up and stalled at the

illuminated fountain in the circular driveway. Somebody poured cream soda into the water. It was foaming and frothing like the memorial of the Iran/Iraq war. The kiddies screamed. Red up to the pits....

Paddy Stinker, the Celtic Scrooge, was doing his accounts. Bilking head office, checking up on his investments, the sinking fund. He heard a commotion, banging and scraping in the street twenty stories below. He peered out through the lace curtains of a lace-curtain Irishman. Half naked in just his short-shorts, smooth shoulders gleaming in the winter twilight, it was Bugs Lothario. He was dragging an iron bed-frame down the street. He'd just plundered it from the Best Lodge dumpster. He was drunk. He shouted at the by-standers that they were all bums.

*

She stood outside the door. She said she was dead. She said you'd be dead too, if you were shot in the head. She was sweating in a white parka decorated with snowflakes over a dirty pink ski jacket. Sweat beaded her brow, dribbled down her chin, caught in her whiskers. I wanted her to remove at least one of her coats. At first she refused. Then she said all right. I'll strip. Bastard! She tugged at the zipper and tore it partly off the lining. She threw the parka at me. Then she popped the metal buttons of the ski jacket and threw it at me too. I meekly folded them over my arm like a waiter. I carried them up the dark-varnished stairs to her room on the third floor and hung them neatly in her closet. Like a valet.

When I returned to the main floor she was still hovering around the office door. She stared blankly at the clock in the hallway, wondering when she could get her next cigarette. I told her to get away from the door, to sit in the lounge, to watch TV. She told me to fuck off. I said calm down to her broad back as she retreated down the hall into the lounge. I heard her damn me to hell, call me bastard and atheist. She read the bible regularly. She was saved. She was also a lawyer, and an I.T. Specialist.

*

Lois was a wise and pretty girl. She never caused any trouble. Except everyone noticed that when she was away the house was a lot calmer. It was also a lot cleaner. There were no trails of slopped coffee from the dining room to the lounge. Fewer things got stolen. In fact nothing got stolen when Lois wasn't around. Angel even had enough pin money after supper to buy herself a coffee at Nik's. Usually Lois just took it. She even stole the manager's cigarettes. She'd light up right outside the big bay office window in plain view of staff. She wanted everyone to know. She was a good girl. She went to the food bank on the other side of my house. She told the Holy Fathers that we didn't feed her. She was hungry. Wa-a-a-ah. She came back with enough food for a small needy family. She opened the jars of peanut butter and the canned goods. She sampled their contents with her finger and left them to go bad on her dresser. Everything went bad. I had to go into her room to throw them out before they drew vermin. When I warned her that food in the room was against House rules she acted astonished. Couldn't she make herself a sandwich? She was a big girl. Not to mention wise and pretty. She knew the rules. That's why she did it.

Lois was cut off cigarettes. Staff entered client's room during room check's at 6 P.M. and smelled smoke. Staff saw plume of smoke rising behind bed. Upon investigation discovered client had wrapped lit cigarette in paper towel and stuffed it between mattress and wall. Staff informed client that setting fires in room was against House Rules. Client was shocked.

Lois would just go and turn a few tricks. She'd get her cigarettes. It amazed me but she still had her takers. My neighbour walking his dog in the morning regularly met her coming out of the alley with one boyfriend or another. She was a good girl all right.

*

The manager was an irresponsible boomer. Vito said he was really an old hippy. For once he got it right. Then he put the wrong spin on it. Poor Vito. He meant that hippies were good because they were easy-going. They didn't get angry when you were late for shift change. I hated hippies. They were ass-holes like Vito. Vito once gave me a book by David Suzuki. The cheek. I'm convinced that he and the manager joined the green party out of parsimony.

The manager was obsessive about the cigarette money. I used to go to a variety store across from the hospital and buy the contraband “Native” cigarettes. The staff then sold them out of the office, for a little more than what they cost. This meant that Amanda didn't have to pay fifty cents for a cigarette from the Koreans on the corner. The money she made in the “kitchen program” went a lot farther. In a few minutes she could panhandle enough for a pack. When all the cigs were gone I took the money out of the little blue dish and bought some more.

He started to use my cigarette money as a float. This meant that he was always dipping into it to pay the tenants for kitchen work. He had a bad memory, especially when it came to other people's money. I believe he shorted the cig money himself, then used the shortage as an excuse to take the money home with him. I think he slept with it. He obviously had a touch of OCD himself.

Then a Front-Line Worker got busted by Customs for buying contraband cigs. Poindexter was convinced that he'd been snitched on by a comrade. That was their “M.O.” The fine was twenty-four hundred bucks and a criminal record. Poindexter already had one.

*

Luigi was a middle-aged Italian man. He was always going on about no head, no arms, no legs. He was slight and short

with what he hoped were real lady-killer looks. He had a dapper moustache with turned-up ends. He wore his hair foppishly long and he regularly greased it with some of the jell that he stored dozens of tubes of in the drawers under his bed. He also had all kinds of shaving lotion and foam in aerosol spray cans. It was all highly flammable and Luigi had a smoking problem.

During room check staff found smouldering butts and paper garbage in a Styrofoam cup behind client's radiator. All we could do was evict him. The manager would write him a letter.

*

Howard finally left for the Holstein Center. It was his “spa.” At least it wasn't another flop like the House. Earlier he had been aggressive to Keith. He said he wanted to kill him. He had known him for years. He had been his client in another House. Keith was his scapegoat. When he was delusional the imaginary friend he held the door open and waited for was named “Keith.” Sitting in the lounge with Keith and me during one of Keith's regular cigarette breaks, Howard started to swear at the news announcer on CNN. Was it Dan Rather? Keith asked him to watch his language. He told Keith to fuck off, and that he was going to kill him and his wife too. Keith said he was skating on very thin ice. Howard stormed out of the lounge.

A little later he came to us in the office. He apologized to Keith for threatening him and asked him to please call the police right away next time. Keith said he didn't want to call the police. It wasn't necessary. He said Howard should stop taking out his frustration on others every time he ran out of money. Howard said it wasn't money. He was feeling suicidal. He wanted a “PRN” and a subway token. The usual prescription.

Keith said he knew that if he handed him five dollars he'd go

to McDonald's and have a coffee. Howard shook his head as if only he knew the full story and it was sad. He said, “No, I don't think so Keith. I don't think so.” Keith got him his sedative out of the filing cabinet and some water in a paper cup. He gave him a token from the House pouch. “Thank you, Keith,” he said, at his politest. “I want you to know that next time you should just call the police right away.” Keith said he would if he thought it was necessary. Howard waved his fingers at us from the doorway. I thought he was going to ask us to call him a cab, but he was off.

I once told the manager that I thought just giving Howard the five dollars, which after all was what he really wanted, would save “the system” a lot of money. He said I evidently didn't know “the system” very well. “The system” had the bed either way. Putting up Howard merely justified it.

*

I spent one difficult evening with Howard. I had been working at the House for only a few weeks. Most of the time I'd been on the midnight shift, which was what I'd been trained for. I'd just dispensed the six o'clock "meds" to Minnie, Huey, Bessie, et al. Katrina always wanted hers before supper at 4:30. She wanted them earler, before Leroy arrived at 4:00, but we wouldn't give them to her. We used to, but it confused Leroy. Without checking the "meds" sheets or even looking at the dosette in his hand, he'd give the tenants their evening meds, thinking they were their 6 o'clcock meds. They were too addled to remember that they'd already had their 6 o'clock meds at 4. No less addled himself, Leroy would try to give the tenants their evening meds at 10 o'clcock. He'd finally look at the dosette, notice that the meds for the day were gone, and accuse someone else of giving them out.

Howard always got his “meds” after supper. To-night he waited outside while Bessie counted her pills on the little round table where the manager counted the cigarette money and Bobby Martinette prepared the pin money envelopes. There were nine. They ranged in size from tiny yellow

clozapine tablets to large football-shaped lozenges that she took for diabetes. She took her time. She asked me if she was going to get better. I doubted it, but I said yes. She asked me for some of the peanuts that I had in a plastic container on the mantle. She already had her snack in her purse. I'd given her two muffins. Everyone else got one. I poured the peanuts onto a napkin where the pills had been. She thanked me. She wouldn't get better if she didn't stop eating so much.

Bessie folded the nuts in the napkin and put them in her enormous black purse with her muffins and cigarettes. I looked up and saw Howard scowling behind the reinforced glass. Bessie was talking about her other selves. She said she was a lot of different women. Some of them were bad. They said bad things about us. She tried not to listen. She was good. She wanted to think that we were good too. I doubted that too, but I said I thought we were. I knew she was good.

She was good-hearted. She had a few friends among the female tenants. She'd give each one twenty dollars on her birthday. That was a fortune for someone on disability. She was very sensitive. Last Christmas she was sitting alone in the dining room and broke down sobbing. The manager blamed Christmas. It was hard on us.

She had style. She wasn't tall. She was huge. She draped herself in folds of dark shiny material that always matched. I gave her an old fedora. She wore it with a man's dress pants, shirt and vest. She looked like a gangster. When I cleaned her room I was impressed by all the clothes she had. They broke the rack in her closet, towered in the plastic bins on her dresser, and spilled over onto her room-mate's bed. There was something amoebic about the way her wardrobe spread. Not about its size.

She was also very lazy. Cleaning her room I smelled something under a heap of garbage at the foot of the bed. She'd buried her waste basket under empty potato chip bags, crumpled cigarette packs, and dirty stockings. In it was a dessicated turd. She'd "pinched one" (as Keith liked to say) in her room. It was painful to imagine her enormous ass looming

over the tiny basket. I tried not to. I wanted to be good. Howard wiggled his fingers behind the glass. It was time she went.

*

She probably was a gangster or at least a gangster's moll. I think she'd been a hooker. I think I know who her pimp was. I got acquaonted with him before I worked in the House. He was always around to see Bessie or a friend of his named Barrie. The first time I saw Barrie he was smoking a joint on the front lawn of the drop-in cente on the other side of my house. He usually sat on the front steps of Anomie House. I talked to him there almost every day one summer two years ago. I had lost my job selling antiques in a crazy store on Thing Street because the owner was too busy chasing women to buy me anything to sell. He was cunt struck.

I was running a flea market in my front yard to raise rent money. Barrie was amused when I asked him to watch my stuff while I went inside to get lunch. He said that one weekend he'd robbed eleven variety stores. In jail he'd been brain damaged in a fight and he'd contracted hepatitis from dirty needles. At the end of the summer I'd run out of stuff to sell. I had a few photograph albums with photos of someone else's long-dead family. Barrie looked over at them with disgust. He thought no one would buy them.

*

I was sitting on my porch nextdoor, guarding my inventory. It was the early afternoon. Barrie had gone inside. He didn't eat anything for lunch. He drank a can of "Insure" a day. That was all. He was losing weight.

A pair of "Doc Martins" hurled over the second floor balcony of the House next door. They landed in my sales area. A man shouted. I recognized 's voice. Then there was a hail of tapes, sheet music, and clothing. I heard wood splintering. Pieces of

a guitar followed.

Poindexter finally came out of the House. That was the first time I saw him. He was wearing a name tag as well as a set of relief keys. Fortunately they got rid of the tags before I started to work there. Poindexter strode into the yard. He clasped his hands behind his back. He was a young black man, not bad looking but with a trace of nerdiness thanks to his glasses. I shouldn't criticize. I was holding a book. I was always holding a book. My sale attracted some very stupid people. It helped to have something to look at.

Poindexter introduced himself. He apologized for the behavior of his client. He asked me to please call the police if it happened again. I thought that was his job. I told him not to worry. I could have sold the shoes.

*

One day in September Barrie wasn't on the steps. His worker drove him to the House that afternoon. He got out of the car and went straight into the House without acknowledging me or talking to Amanda and Katrina who were loitering on the porch. I was packing up my unsold family albums when I saw him come outside with Keith. I heard Barrie say that he was fucked. Keith was carrying his black "Roots" bag. He was on his way home. I noticed the brace. Keith said everyone was.

The next day Barrie asked me if I thought he'd see fifty. He said he had cancer. During the few months that he had left I got acquainted with his and Bessie's friend, Donald. He was nice to me because I liked Barrie. Sometimes he was drunk. He'd shake my hand and hold it too long. Then he'd say something mean. He took Barrie drinking a few last times, since it didn't matter any more what happened to his liver. Barrie beat him up. He must have been a bad drunk.

Donald always seemed to turn up where he wasn't supposed to be. He wouldn't ring the door-bell and check in with the staff as guests were supposed to do. He didn't consider me staff or

himself a guest. He would enter the lounge where Bessie sprawled in front of the T.V., watching the soaps. He'd make himself at home with coffee, and get into a fight with Katrina. Katrina was jealous of Bessie and refused to shut up when Donald was around. I'd follow Donald into the lounge, or find him there, and ask him to go back and ring the door-bell. Katrina would be screaming for him to go. Usually he'd leave. Keith said I was being a prick. I disiked Donald. Bessie was indifferent.

*

Bessie lumbered past Howard without acknowledging him. She began her daily ascent of the dark-varnished stairs. She came down in the morning and stayed down till bed-time, which was right after supper. There was nothing else to do till breakfast. Howard held the door longer than necessary. He grunted “Come on, Keith.” Keith was somewhere on the road to Ossington.

He waited while I retrieved his "meds" file from the stack of "six o'clock meds" beside the photo-copier, removed his dosette from the filing cabinet, and poured the water into a dixie-cup. I shown him his name on the dosette before tapping the pills from the 6 o'clock slot into his cupped hands. He accepted the dixie-cup and swallowed the water. He even showed me the inside of his mouth, something Leroy wanted me to ask everyone to do. I never did. Poindexter said the tenants had been in the hospital. They were too good at "cheeking" to get caught like that. Leroy would take me aside to warn me that a particular tenant was cheeking his meds. They all were.

Then Howard asked me for a "PRN." He was at his politest. He used his soft voice. He was apologetic and ingratiating. He waved his hand and wiggled his fingers. He was a con. I said I didn't want to give him medication he didn't need. He'd said he really needed it. He was beginning to be very anxious. He didn't have any money. I told him to wait half an hour. If he still felt anxious we'd see about the "PRN."

He came back. He said he was feeling suicidal. Did I think he should go to the Holstein Centre? Maybe I should call the police.

I told him that he shouldn't call the Holstein Centre either. He seemed to be increasing his requests. Compared to calling the Centre, the sedative almost looked like a good idea. It was brilliant compared to the police. They made me anxious and I didn't have a "PRN."

Howard accepted the "PRN" as a favor to me. He really thought I should call the Holstein Centre to get him a "reservation." Then I should call the police to get him an escort, because it was a long way to walk and he was fragile. With his thick beard and heavy six-foot body he was a con, a thug. He frightened the other tenants. He'd hold the smoking room door open for his imaginary friend and grunt "Come on, Keith."

Howard's friend was a version of Keith that he had constructed out of a relationship that went back many years. He had been Keith's client at other houses before Anomie. They had been together at the notorious "Fifth Avenue Housing and Support Services," whose manager drove a new Mercedes while the workers (Keith included) hadn't had a raise in ten years, and where one day the tenants' case histories were abandoned on the boulevard. They blew around the neighbourhood all week.

Howard had a flesh-and-blood boyfriend, with wasted queer-bait features. I think all along he probably wanted to visit him, but was too lazy to go on his own and too shrewd to think anyone would loan him busfare for that. Kurt stole credit cards and gave them to Howard. Howard used them to buy things for Kurt and himself. Kurt calculated that when Howard got caught he wouldn't get punished because he was mentally ill. Kurt was staying in a men's shelter downtown, but Howard had a girl friend named Esmerelda.

*

Howard, Kurt, and Esmerelda comprised a "menage a trois." When their money was gone, and Esmerelda didn't have any more to loan them, they stole her things and pawned them. Then Esmerelda, who was mentally ill herself, would call Howard's worker to demand restitution. Howard would have to repay her out of his pin money. It would take months. Most of that time he'd be wretchedly broke. He'd pace up and down outside the House, looking for someone to loan him a dollar for a coffee, or a quarter for a cigarette.

Kurt would disappear, but Esmerelda would call us half a dozen times every evening, wanting to talk to Howard. He didn't want to talk to her, and we weren't allowed to tell her anything. She'd beg us to use our "telepathy" to bring him to the phone. Poindexter would stare at the phone as if it repulsed him. Then he'd hang up. If I answered she'd try to get me to tell Howard to do something, although I had no such authority. She'd say to tell him that she missed him terribly, that he had to come right over. I'd say that I'd tell him she called. She'd tell me to tell him that she was lonely, that she'd rented some videos, and it was O.K. to bring Kurt. I'd repeat myself. I'd tell him that she called, that was all. Finally she'd tell me that she was feeling suicidal. If Howard didn't come she'd kill herself. I didn't believe her, but because she was a tenant in another House I had to tell her that any more talk like that and I'd call the police to take her in for an "assessment." That shut her up for the rest of the evening.

I met her at the company picnic. It happened every September in a large park where the neighbors let their dogs run off leash. The manager didn't go. Keith went but he wasn't very enthusiastic. He said the staff tried to make it a field day, with races and prizes. The tenants were happy to get a ham burgher and a few cigarettes. Especially the cigarettes.

Esmerelda wasn't ugly. She was middle-aged, buxom, with long bleached blonde hair and a florid complexion. She wore red high-heeled shoes. I remember her sitting alone at a picnic table. Howard came over and talked to her for a minute. Then he approached Keith, who was holding a frisbie. He suddenly

backed him into another table and gave him a great hug. Keith patted him on the back with the frisbie. He looked foolish. Howard said he wouldn't be home that evening, he was staying at his friend's. It was obvious who he meant. Keith didn't bother to tell him to go back and get his meds.

*

Tonight Howard couldn't sleep. The "PRN" wasn't working. He wanted a dollar so he could get a coffee at McDonald's. If he could just sit somewhere for a while he'd be all right. Otherwise he'd go to the Centre. I gave him the dollar. It was worth a try, but after he left I got out his file. He stayed at McDonald's till about 9:30. He must have had a free refill. I saw him climbing the dark-varnished stairs, urging "Keith" to come on. Then he was at the office door. He said I'd better call the police right away. He was going to kill someone. He had an axe in his room.

I knew he didn't, because I'd spent an hour that day tidying up his room. He had a lot of laundry and the usual litter. The most dangerous things were the hangers. I let him into the office. He sat in Keith's chair beside the computer while I dialed the number. I handed him the phone and listened in the worn office chair while he told the operator that he was psychotic, that he had a lethal weapon, that he was a danger to himself and others. When he was finished I asked him to hand the receiver back to me. I told the operator that I was the support worker at Anomie House, a residential treatment facility for people with mental illness. The man she'd just spoken to was delusional. There was no weapon. There was no danger. She'd suspected as much. Howard's language was formulaic. He'd been around too many workers….

*

The snow crunched under my five-dollar Goodwill shoes. The cobbled front yard of the House was littered with the debris of pin-money envelopes and cigarette packs, butts and ashes, pop

cans, etc. It spilled over into the front yard of my house next door. There were yellow bags of sidewalk salt beside the railing on the porch, but I nearly slipped on the icy burlap runner. Lawrence hadn't salted it yet. During shift change in the office Bobby Martinette had everything neatly arranged in front of him on the little round table. The stapler, the staple remover, and the paper-clip container were lined up beside the ruler. A yellow pad was in front of him. He'd written a few notes about what had happened from midnight till 8 A.M. There was a bulb on the third floor landing that needed changing. Leonard needed pin money; otherwise, he couldn't get his morning pop. Bobby must have been bored around 3 in the morning. He'd peeked into the pin money envelopes.

*

Katrina was angry with Leroy because he was black. Her boyfriend was black. She'd trash everything in her room and kick in the office door if anyone interfered with their weekly visits. Nonetheless she was angry with Leroy because he was black. She said he threw the meds at her. That's how blacks were. She wanted her meds now. I told her she had to wait for Leroy. I didn't add that if I gave her her meds early Leroy would get confused and double-dose her, but that was the reason. She lost her temper completely, screamed at me that she wanted “the boss,” and punched the wall. “I hate this place,” she said. “I hate you too,” she said to Keith specifically. “And your fag friend.” She meant me.

I wrote a shift entry about her that time. I noticed that the entry immediately above it, a quarterly entry, said that Katrina was doing much better, interacting well with other tenants and staff.

*

Keith told me a joke. He asked him what you called a black brain surgeon. I knew it was a joke so I said an exceptional person. An anomaly? No, he said. Fucking nigger. I

wondered what he called me when he was with Leroy. Fucking faggot? He made a point of calling cigarettes “fags” when the three of us were together. After shift-change he'd say, “I think I'll have a fag.” “You can have me,” I'd say. Leroy usually looked uneasy.

Once before shift-change they were discussing Katrina. Leroy wondered how her big black boyfriend ever got her to shut up. Keith said he shoved his big cock in her mouth. Leroy laughed and was evidently about to tell some joke about big cocks in mouths when he turned to me and asked me if I were gay. I said yes, thinking that there'd be no point in staying in the closet where someone like Leroy was concerned. I'd just have to put up with all kinds of homophobic remarks.

Standing on the porch with Keith, during yet another cigarette break, he said people who were black or gay or Chinese had an advantage. I think he figured that if Leroy weren't black he'd have been fired years ago. As for himself, he was tall, blond, straight. Master race material.

I told him that it was hard to talk to someone knowing that what he was really thinking was, “Getting away from me, fucking faggot.” Keith said it was hard to know what people really thought, but they probably didn't think that. I said I hoped so. As for himself, I thought he was rather more complicated than he let on. Look at the effect of his accident, for one thing. He had a disability. He'd worked with schizophrenics all his life. That made him almost an eccentric. An eccentric loser, he said.

*

During my first fall at the House I worked with Keith when the manager was on vacation. Keith's wife was away on some kind of training course. Some mornings he was mysteriously late. He'd apologize for leaving me on my own and say he'd been out walking. He didn't seem like the type to contemplate nature, alone at 8 o'clock in Ossington. He must have had something on his mind. I wonder if he was already

contemplating suicide. Perhaps he was only thinking of quitting. At the very least he had had to deliberate whether or not to come to work in the morning. It had required conscious decision, perhaps also resolve.

*

Keith phoned me very early one morning. I was doing Bobby's midnight to 8 A.M. shift. Bobby had called in sick after another argument with Leroy over whose turn it was to mop the floor. Keith said he wouldn't be coming to work today. It was 4 A.M. and he hadn't been able to sleep because of the pain in his knees. He was lying on the sofa in the basement of the town house he'd gone into debt for. He'd put pillows under his knees and propped up his legs. The painkillers weren't helping. He'd just taken another sleeping pill. I think that was why he was less reserved than usual. I asked him if he often had trouble sleeping. He said every night. I said I was sorry. I asked how long he'd been having such trouble. He said ten years. I asked if there were anything that could be done about it. He said no. He'd have it for the rest of his life. He had to live with it. We didn't know that it wasn't for much longer. I said I was sorry. He said he was sorry I had to work his shift on top of my own. He told me not to get burnt out. He was breathing heavily. I thought maybe the drugs were beginning to take effect. He said there was work to do. I couldn't understand why he was breathing so heavily. Then he said with a sob in his voice, "We need your help." I couldn't mistake his meaning. I was very moved but I didn't know what to say. I said he'd be "missed." I hope that, in the context of a one-day absence, he didn't mistake my meaning.

*

I remember the time we went to the Canadian National Exhibition. In my neighbourhood workers have been taking clients to the "Ex" for decades. We were called keepers. They

were called patients and worse things. It's a tradition. It changes, and it stays the same. I've seen pictures of the male attendants at the Queen Street asylum circa 1910. "Male" is tautological in historical context.

They were standing in an airing court, dressed for sport. I think it was cricket. They weren't at all bad looking. In white T-shirts that showed off their broad shoulders, they were handsome. I suppose before there were a lot of drugs keepers had to be fit. They were all tall. There were no doubt a lot of Scots and Englishmen among them, like Bobby and Keith. Bobby was Scottish. I can't forebear adding "of course."

Keith was born in Lutton in Bedfordshire. His parents brought him to Canada when he was still a toddler. They came by boat. They would have been among the last immigrants to experiene the archetypal arrival into the Gulf of St. Lawrence out of the open sea. It was like being ingested. They were working class. Keith and Bobby's precursors not infrequently had affairs with their female clients, call them what you will. Maybe the keepers became clients. They socialized at the periodic asylum balls. Sometimes they became fathers.

If you took the manager, Bobby, Keith and myself , put us in T-shirts and photographed us holding cricket bats in a park, we'd look just like them. We'd look like keepers dressed for cricket circa 1910, in an old photograph hanging in the corridor of the administration building.

I once read pages and pages of stuff in the provincial archives. There were letters in patients' files beginning "Dear Reader." There were notes and reports like our own shift entries and incident reports. There were notes from social workers complaining that they'd given patients tickets to the "Ex," but the patients had sold the tickets and used the money to see a show.

I loved to read such stuff. There between two sheets of yellow foolscap would be a spare ticket to the "Ex" forty years ago.

Keith Died This Weekend

I wished there was any certainty that our own entries and reports would be preserved. I liked to think of someone like me reading what I wrote. Like me, but not me. Keith said it wouldn't happen. It was the ministry's new policy. After seven years they'd all be burnt. Cremated. Now that Keith himself has been burnt, I find that totally unacceptable. I also think it's typicaly cruel of them to tell us in advance that nothing is to be preserved. They do it in the name of confidentiality. But how are confidences kept by consigning them to the flames along with whom we confide in? They might as well cremate us all right now. Why wait seven years?

We were sitting at one of a row of picnic tables set up on the concrete floor of the "Food Pavillion." We were escorting Amanda, Angel, Katrina, Leon, and Chuck. Chuck didn't usually accompany us on our outings. He was more interested in music and bars. I think he'd come for the free food. We weren't cool, or at least I wasn't. Keith considered himself pretty hep.

Chuck was definitely cool. I watched his stocky body as he approached our table through a small crowd, carrying a tray of fries. Even in the heat he wore a leather vest. It clashed with his baggy shorts. He always wore sun glasses. Today his dark hair was braided.

Keith sat diagonally across from me. I remember the way his Ray Bans hung from the collar of his shirt. It was a red and white checked short-sleeved sports shirt. He'd undone the first two buttons. Of course it was late summer (the opening of the "Ex" signalled the end of summer), and it was hot. For a change he wasn't wearing anything under his sports shirt.

Amanda reached for his glasses where they hung in the crotch of his collar. He covered himself with his large hand. She was quite capable of grabbling him in the crotch of his pants. I'd seen her do it in the kitchen. Keith blushed. She laughed. She asked him why his chest was so freckled. To me it didn't appear to be freckled, but covered with red blotches. It was smooth, at least what I could see of it in the V of his collar.

He told us to never mind. Amanda couldn't or wouldn't get it off her mind, however. She was sex-obsessed. She asked why he wasn't hairier. He said he didn't know. He'd always wanted a hairy back. She peered under the table at our legs. She said our hairy legs looked sexy in shorts. Angel laughed. By then Chuck had joined us. Between mouth-fulls of fries he told Amanda to stop embarassing us.

It was on the way back from our first trip to the "Ex," when Keith first told me about his chronic pain. Bobby had gone with us early in the morning, right after working a "midnight" shift. Naturally he was tired and left early. Keith was tired too, and limped slightly on the way back from the lakefront. Angel and Amanda were dawdling somewhere behind us. Katrina was forging ahead. I'd bank-rolled the expedition, because Keith hated to advance the money. He said he always had a lot of trouble getting it back from our skin-flint manager. He probably didn't even have any.

I'd given everyone ten dollars spending money. None of them had spent any of it however. Their money went farther at McDonald's. Keith and I had spent most of our allowances playing the rigged games of chance. Then everyone had boarded the polar express. It whipped around very fast, but never went far off the ground. I remember the sight of Amanda and Katrina, their mouths wide open, eyes wide open too, clenching the bar in front of them as their long hair lashed their faces and the train took off.

I asked Keith what made him so tired. He said the pain in his knees kept him awake. I could sense him gauging whether or not to be open and deciding he would be. I think it had do with the spirit of the outing. It was palpable to me, and probably to him too. It was something families did. The last time I'd gone was forty years ago, when I was no older than Keith when he came here. I even arrived by water, or at least we crossed over the water on the little bridge at the entrance to the grounds. My family had been together then. At least we did things together, as a family. My father was with us. I hadn't been there since that day forty years ago, but things seemed familiar: the layout of the grounds, the stuffed

animals, the proximity of the lake. I had returned as a member of a family. I was with Keith.

I told him some of this. He said it must bring back a lot of memories. It will bring back even more now that he's become a memory too. He's joined my permanently dysfunctional family. His pictures will go into one of those albums Barrie said I'd never sell.

*

Keith and Leroy used to cruise the women passing by in front of the house. They would park their cars in the little front yard that had been paved with cobblestones so our maintenance man wouldn't have to cut the grass. Leroy had a van that he used for charity work but which I never saw a tenant ride in. Leroy was afraid of contagion. Keith's little car was virtually our taxi. Needless to say, the company was too cheap to provide us with a car. Leroy and Keith would stand and smoke beside their respective vehicles. They kept a leisured gaze onthe sidewalk for the right woman. I knew when she passed. Leroy smiled with his teeth. Keith reacted rather like a ponter dog, following her progress with his head. Sometimes he followed her with his whole body. He'd say, take me home with you. If I was sitting on the sreps next door, and I usually was, he'd wonder aloud how Jon could just sit there. It was obvious.

There was something very male about it all. The two men, one black and one white, smoking in shorts and T shirts, the hot sunlight gleaming on the cars, the humid air scented with tobacco, gasoline and wax. I like men. Keith said Leroy and Bobby were both great guys. They just needed a lot of guidance. At other times he referred to them respectively as cunt and clown. While it was possible to enjoy either one as a man, I preferred Keith.

*

I thought Keith bonded too much with Leroy. I noticed that he always acted differently around him. The cruising was partly an example of that, not that he didn't do it at other times. He just did it more naturally, without over-statement. As someone said of Lady Macbeth, I thought he protested too much.

I also believe that he really hated Leroy. Perhaps hatred implies a degree of respect. Maybe "despised" is the better word. The racist jokes were the lowest expression of his disregard. He also referred to Leroy as a miserable sod. That was before they knew that I was gay, but that wouldn't have made any difference. Keith was referring to Leroy's delusional business schemes, his meanness, his hypocrisy, his incompetence at work, his unhappiness at home -- which is only a partial list.

Leroy ran a mail-order business. He had a whole catalogue devoted to religious items made out of plastic that glowed in the dark. I doubt that it made any money. He knew that my landlady and her mother were Polish Catholic. He assumed that they were religious, so he asked me to give them a copy. I showed it to them, apologetically, because I knew they'd be insulted. They were.

He also sold computers. He said his "company" would assemble whatever the client wanted. He didn't know the difference between a Pentium IV and a Commodore 64. He said he could assemble a pentium for me for a few hundred dollars. I didn't say anything to him but I told the manager that I'd just bought one at the Goodwill for five. The market was flooded. I.B.M. wanted out of the business. I knew a competent programmer who couldn't get work. Look at Keith's wife. The manager said if I explained that to Leroy it wouldn't make any difference. He wouldn't get it.

Leroy sincerely believed that one day he'd strike it rich. He spent a lot of money on lottery tickets. He was more likely to get rich that way than through any of his business ventures. He was even more likely to get struck by lightening. Nonetheless he was convinced that one day he'd return as a

master to the island he came from. He'd have an estate, money, and time. He was fifty years old. Poindexter said the trouble with people like him was they believed in easy solutions. They didn't understand that you had to work for anything good.

I would have felt sorry for Leroy except he obviously didn't have any consideration for me at all. He was probably homophobic. He once asked me all of a sudden if I was "into leather." He obviously assumed all gay people were. He might have merely been curious. I think his knowledge of contemporary mores came straight from "The Jerry Springer Show." He watched it regularly on the dining room T.V. It was the one venue where he was sure to see worse losers than himself. Much worse.

More seriously he would have unjustly sacrificed me to save himself. I learned that one evening when Huey met me on the street and accused me of not giving him a pill from his evening meds. I knew that I'd only given him his dinner-time meds. I had shown him the dosette the way I always did. The dinner-time slot was empty. The evening meds were in the slot beneath it. I never left pills behind, because I always checked.

I went into the House to speak to Leroy. He was in the kitchen. I told him what Huey had told me. I asked if I could borrow his keys so I could see myself. I went up the narrow coffee-stained stairs and let myself into the office. The dosette was on the little round table. It was as Huey said. The evening meds were gone except for one tiny pill. I think it was clozapine. I returned Leroy's keys. He told me to remember to sign for Huey's evening meds. I told him I hadn't given him his evening meds. Moreover, I told him what I was sure had happened. He had given them himself and, as usual, not signed for them. He'd also left a pill behind. That was his signature.

Leroy became defensive. He invoked his twenty years experience vs. my half as many months. The next shift-change with Keith he was still talking about it. He went on

and on about that pill. How could it have been there? The reason was obvious. He felt he was always the one suspected. The reason for that was also obvious. He made too many mistakes. The manager had already warned me to say nothing. Keith humored him, told him nobody was pointing a finger at him. He just kept smoking on the porch.

Later I asked him why he didn't speak up. I said he was two-faced, wishy-washy. He smiled. He said there was no point in being honest with Leroy.

*

Keith, Leroy and I discussed sex while setting up supper one evening shortly before Christmas. Actually, we discussed masturbation. They had been joking about "wacking off." Being queer and an outsider so far as heterosexual arrangements were concerned, I said it came as a surprise to me that straight married men masturbated. Evidently they didn't have passionate sex every night, or if they did they had it with themselves. Both of them laughed. Keith explained that for the first six months there was plenty of sex. Leroy interjected that it quickly became a low priority. Keith agreed. It didn't make the Top Ten List of Reasons for Staying Married. I said it looked like it was mainly a legal arrangement (Balzac would have laughed). Keith agreed. He said he couldn't remember ever having heard his parents making love.

*

Keith got my allusions to old John Waters movies. Later the same day I inadvertently "came out" to Leroy, I passed by the house on my way to the I.G.A. Keith and Leroy were smoking on the porch. That day the water had been cut off so we'd been refilling the toilet tanks with expensive bottled water to keep the waste moving. They'd just surprised Bessie squatting on the toilet, burying it under her mountainous black buttocks. I said it must have been like walking in on Divine.

Keith Died This Weekend

Keith said in a John Waters movie we'd fill the tanks by pissing in them. Leroy asked what kind of movie was that. Keith said he wasn't hep.

Then there were the jokes. They were real stinkers. He was going to put a spot in the middle of his forehead and hang a potato from his crotch and become a dick-'tater. Keith didn't have many clothes and some of his favorite clothing, like his "Leafs" shirt, got ruined with bleach. We traded shirts. He gave me a black sports shirt. I noticed right away how nice it smelled. He said he washed it in Tide. He asked me if I knew why. He said (with a lisp) "because it was cold out tide."

One night a few weeks before Christmas we were standing on the porch after supper and he said he couldn't drive his wife's car over the curb without damaging the bumper. He said he couldn't get it up, and winked at me. But it was worth a try, he said as he handed me the cell-phone. Hold this anyway, he added. As opposed to his cock, he meant.

*

Sometimes I think Keith was just a jerk. He'd take the cigs I was always buying him and stuffing in his little Roots bag and hand them out to everybody like he thought he was J.P. Fucking Morgan.... But he wouldn't give me a good handshake.... At least not after I said I was gay.

I remember just before Christmas vacation, his last. We were standing together on the front porch before he left for the holidays. He was very unhappy. He didn't like Christmas anyway, because it was so "commercial," but it was especially bad that year because his wife was unemployed. He was broke – I knew, because I was buying him his cigarettes, and he was desperate enough to let me. He said he really appreciated it, every time he went over to his "Roots" bag and looked in and, lo, there was another carton – but he felt so bad, because he'd never be able to pay me back. I see why, now.

The manager had already said good-bye. He had taken Keith's hand and mine, and gone to his crummy apartment building around the corner. He didn't care one way or another about Christmas. Keith suddenly offered me his hand to shake. He hadn't done that since the first time I bought him a carton. I'd been sitting one the front steps waiting for him to come to work in his little car. I'd called him over. He wanted to know why I was doing that. I said because I thought he had to have something for himself. I'd noticed that he hadn't even bought a chocolate bar in weeks.

This time I must have held his hand a bit too long, because he withdrew it violently. Then he proceeded to put himself down, like he didn't want me to be attracted to him, and maybe at the same time was enjoying the attraction, and indulging himself a little. He said he was just a loser, a middle-aged loser getting a gut, and he was straight.

That Christmas I got depressed and nearly quit. Everyone thought it was Christmas, but it was Keith. He could do that to me.

*

I have a scrap of yellow foolscap torn from the pad on the clipboard that Keith wanted Bobby to leave in the kitchen.

Keith had to tape a sticky note to the board reminding Bobby to "Please leave clipboard and pad in kitchen." He subsequently added "and pen." Otherwise, as we know, after midnight Bobby would put away the clipboard, the pad, and the pen in a drawer of the "meds" cabinet, or in a cubby hole in the desk, wherever he thought they "belonged." It may be significant that Bobby never seems to have thought that anything belonged where it was accessible for use. Things belonged at some remove from the people that used and needed them. I wonder if he felt the same way about the people. Keith must be where he belongs.

Keith put similar notes on the stapler, the tape dispenser, the

apron, the dustpan, the broom. He couldn't put a sticky note on the electric tea kettles, so he wrote an entry in the common log, telling Bobby not to move them. They were a mysterious obsession. He wouldn't put them away. He couldn't. I believe he wanted to, but there was nowhere to put them. Instead he separated them. He left one where it beside the sink where it could easily be refilled. He left the other at the other end of the kitchen, inconveniently far removed from the taps. We would replace the kettle, and Bobby would remove it again, night after night.

That might have been disturbing enough, or amusing, dependng on one's sense of humor. More disturbing were the obvious signs of bad temper. Bobby removed things and put them away, night after night, in steadily mounting anger. The plate was loose over the outlet, as if it Bobby had yanked the plug out of the socket. The bottom of one of the kettles was cracked. Keith said Bobby was probably furious. He could imagine him cursing: "FUBAR."

On the scrap of yellow paper attached to the clipboard, with the pen that dangled from it clipboard on a piece of string, Keith wrote "Merry Christmas."

*

I asked the manager to cancel my shifts for the month. By late January I was beginning to be anxious about not working. I devised an excuse to go next door. It wasn't difficult, since the manager still owed me the cost of two cartons of cigarettes, about one hundred dollars. That was the float that I withdrew every few weeks to replenish the cigarettes with. It was mine, although the manager took it home with home every night. He spent too much time counting it.

There was a new man in the House. He was black, middle-aged, balding and fat. He sprawled in one of the office chairs with a proprietary, officious air. Perhaps it was the clip-board in his lap. He had obviously been taking notes, though there was nothing worth noting unless he too was writing a novel.

Keith introduced him as the volunteer in the kitchen program. The kitchen program was Amanda peeling potatoes or Huey wheeling them in from Keith's car.

It was obvious that he was using the House as a dodge. It enabled him to satisfy the work requirements for welfare that was supporting himself, his wife and several children. He had probably described it as a valuable training experience. He had also enrolled in a fake school called “Lincoln College.” The government paid his tuition.

He was candid about his dodges, even indignant. He had been a Marxist back in Ethiopia before tribalism divided the country. Now he looked back with nostalgia on the days of the Emperor. He said sometimes that was what you needed. A strong man in charge. He didn't understand why there was no Canadian patriotism. Once I blurted out that I thought Canada was a shit-house. He looked shocked. That was for Keith, who was present. I was paraphrasing Celine.

I said that this country wasted its human resources. He agreed with me there. I knew he would. He had been a doctor back in Ethiopia. I thought of telling him that I was a doctor too. I had a ph.d. in English from the University of Montage. I had a B.A. and an M.A. from the local University of Titz. I unplugged toilets for a living.

Eugenides hadn't come here to unplug toilets, although he was full of criticism of the decadent West. He spent a lot of time sipping tea watching coverage of the Iraq War on CNN. He was convinved that the Americans had finally gone too far. I'm sure he considered me decadent too. He was curious about my sexuality. He liked to contrast male and female anatomy. He considered it unjust that the male had to perform while the female could be passive. He told one of the other workers that back home they used to stone homosexuals. That is how he saw gender.

He asked me if I had children. I said no. He said it was each man's duty to his family to procreate. Otherwise everything stopped with us. I thought of telling him that there were other

kinds of continuity besides children. I wasn't even sure that children were one. It depended on the child. I didn't think I owed anything to my family. So far as I was concerned everything could stop. It would.

I didn't like Eugenides very much. The house already sheltered twenty egotists whom we were paid to served. Nevertheless he sometimes behaved as if it revolved around himself. He would sit in the office and peruse the confidential client files. He would remove papers we were working on in order to process his own voluminous documents. He commandeered the telephone and the fax machine. He tended to pop up wherever I was working. It was as if he thought I was up to something secret and he wanted to find out what it was. One afternoon I started to mop the kitchen floor and he chose that moment to make himself a coffee and stand sipping in my way. I got angry at him and ordered him to leave the kitchen. He refused. He accused me of having a “complex” about him.

I told him that I was interested in his opinions. In the absence of other staff I was in charge and I had told him to leave the kitchen so he should go. He said no, he was “kitchen volunteer.” I told him a volunteer was supposed to help out. He could help out by doing what he was told by staff, and getting out of the way. He raised his voice and I raised mine. One of the tenants must have told Keith in the office. He came downstairs and told us that if he we didn't both shut up he'd throw us both out of the kitchen. Eugenides was crying by then. He was very sensitive. He sobbed that he was “refugee.” “Refugee” was a notch above support worker.

*

Huey brought Poindexter his watch to repair. Poindexter had no training in that line, but politely examined the watch anyway. A noisome stench emanated from the dial. The hands of time stank of mortality. Then he realized it really was shit. It was caked in shit off Huey's own hands where he'd been scratching himself. He dropped it, disgusted. It

bounced and whirled across the office floor like an insect in its death throes, flashed like a fish's scale in sunlight, winked like Fred Astaire tap-dancing in a storm-sewer....

Huey never wiped his fat ass with anything besides his hand. I'd already noticed the large brown stains on his linen. Shit.

Huey retrieved the watch and pressed it to his ear, grinning broadly. It still ticked.

*

There was a new guest on the horizon. A ghost junk sailed in from China. Big Kung Fu only spoke through an interpreter. Keith asked him if he liked sports. He said the only thing he liked was masturbation. His worker explained that he was into porn. He was getting kicked out of his flop because he sat on the toilet with the door open reading porn and plucking his pubic hairs. He said he was making a cunt.

Besides cunt he liked fires. He was good at setting them, especially in boarding homes with cooking privileges.

Keith wondered which was getting him kicked out.... Masturbation or incendiarism.... Probably both....

*

Leonard looked glum.... Sitting on the porch in his blue housecoat.... I asked him if he liked Christmas.... He said it was his favorite holiday.... He wanted to hang New York City on the tree.... Brilliant....

*

Leonard was a fifty-year-old bed-wetter addicted to fluids. He'd wrap his lips around the bathroom tap and suck back the whole water-works if he could. Then he'd pull up his T-shirt

and rub his smooth belly as it swelled up like a balloon. He'd moan "O-o-o-oh, that feels g-o-o-o-d." The disability allowance folks exhausted all their meagre ingenuity trying to get him extra money for plastic mattress covers. Pee money. Somehow they got some emergency funding. Ecstatic social workers in the manic throes of bipolar dysfunction jammed their cell-phones with the news of their discovery. I suspected all along that it really just came out of his cigarette money, because at the same time they cut him back to one cigarette every even hour. It was too much for mere co-incidence. It was the cigarette money. Everything came out of the little blue Tupperware dish on the mantle. They were all in collusion. No wonder the tenants were crazy.

*

I announced meat-pies with mashed potatoes and carrots. I tapped on the heavy fireproof door. No answer. I had already inserted the master key in the lock. I hardly had to play with it at all before it turned and the door opened, revealing Luigi seated on the bed in a greasy black leather jacket.... Stained trousers with a razor-sharp lady-killer crease.... Pointed lady-killer shoes.... Leisurely smoking a freshly lit hundred-millimeter cigarette pendent between his sensuous heavily whiskered lips....

I said, "No smoking." He sprang at me, shouting get out, he was going to kill me. If I didn't let him finish his cigarette....

I insisted: "No smoking." Luigi extinguished the cigarette by grinding it under the pointed toe of his left lady-killer shoe. He was still going to kill me. He retreated into the hallway, removing another cigarette from the breast pocket of the greasy black leather Jacket as I repeated, "No smoking." He'd get evicted if he didn't stop smoking....

The manager ordered me to write a report. Luigi was getting evicted.

*

Huey wanted his fifteen minutes in the office. I wouldn't let him in. I 'd already brought him his meds in his room. I let myself in with the master key. He was sleeping with the blanket pulled up over his head. It was cold in his room but he'd turned on his little electric fan. It was his soporific device. I pulled the blanket off the foot of his bed, exposing his feet and legs. He'd slept in his clothes again last night. I went to the head of the bed. I said, "Huey, meds." I knew he was awake. He knew he'd been caught. "All right," he said. He lurched upright on the side of the bed. He was wearing a sports-shirt and jeans. We'd bought the shirt together at the Goodwill last week. He'd been so polite to everyone in the store, greeting total strangers and wishing them a good day. Now he was angry. I looked at the dosette to check that it was his. Then I looked at him to see that he was Huey. Then I showed him the dosette so he could see that it was his. I pointed to the slot and asked if it was right. He nodded his head. "Yes." I tapped out the pills into his cupped hands then checked the dosette again to make sure there was nothing left. I showed him the dosette. Empty? "Yes." Finally I told him that because he'd slept in his clothes again last night he wasn't to get any time in the office. "All right, " he said, covering his head again. "Who cares?" He cared.

He returned a few moments later wondering if he had any mail. It was obviously just an excuse to get into the office. Keith was in the washroom. I heard the fan going. I knew his routine. He'd move his bowels, then he'd brush his teeth. He said it made him feel comfortable for the long drive home. The fan went off. In a moment Keith was at the door, baggie in hand. Huey saw his chance and dashed in. He settled his bulk into one of the dirty armchairs reserved for tenants. He'd changed into a bright green GAP sports-shirt.

Keith sat down by the computer. Huey started to complain about his sex feelings and the thirteen men he'd had sex with on the way home from school. He got onto the subject one afternoon after I caught him raving about "fucking fags." I balled him out. I think he concocted the story as an excuse.

Vito took it seriously. He called a meeting in the office as if it were the break-through he'd been looking for. He thought he'd cracked Huey's case. Keith sighed. He'd never finished grade 10. Vito had a B.A. in psychology.

Huey said there was something in his head. People were picking on him. They stared. Then he said he wanted someone to repair the electric socket in his room. Looking at it gave him ideas. I said maybe he was thinking of frying himself. We'd have him for supper. Keith said he'd be rump roast.

*

The nicotine-stained walls of Lois's room were plastered with pictures of models torn from gossip magazines. Young men and women with glossy hair, clear complexions, and perfect smiling teeth. She was a predator, despite the idealized portrait of her by her mother that was tacked unframed to the wall. It showed her in her youth thirty years ago. Stringy brown hair and enormous glasses that made her resemble a parasite. She was always a predator.

Most mornings when I went in to do room-check there was piss in a teacup on top of her dresser. When I quizzed her about it at first she'd deny it but she always confessed eventually. With an air of inexorable honesty. She just couldn't help herself. She was a good girl who did bad things. How can you tell the dancer from the dance?

She had a litany of stupid questions.... A catechism.... A whole inquisition. Why are people bad.... Why do people steal.... Why do people kill.... Why do people hurt dogs.... Why do dogs lift their leg when they pee.... One groped for the answer. There were reasons.... But one was hard-pressed to come up with any.... Heredity....

I tried to forestall her by asking first.... Why do people steal.... She immediately shot back, "Because they're naughty." Why do people hurt dogs? "Because they're sick."

I wanted to ask her the next question. Why are people sick?

I thought of all her robberies. I thought of her taking off down Thing Street, puffing on one of the manager's cigarettes. That one made me smile. All the wounded animals showing up in shelters across the city were another matter....

I tried to implicate her more directly. When she asked me why people were bad I asked her why she pissed in cups. She gave me a sidelong glance and slunk off clutching a warm glass of tea. Or was it urine?

We were really going to miss Lois, after her eviction.

*

I was in the dining room when I heard the shouting. It sounded like it was coming from the smoking lounge, Grand Salon des Gens Perdus, Chambre des Fumeurs, etc. When I entered Big Kung Fu was holding the door open. Actually he was cowering behind it, using it like a shield. Against the slings and arrows of Little Tchaikovsky.... How long was this to be his fortune, he demanded. Outraged....

Little Tchaikovsky stood about four feet high in the middle of the pop-sticky cig-stained linoleum smoking lounge floor. He was holding a glass of tap water in one hand. On the other he wore a black glove bearing the insignia of Keith's team, the Maple Leafs. He flapped it against the glass gleefully shouting what I now understood to be "Pay! Pay!"....

You see! You see! Big Kung Fu emerged from his shelter and frantically waved his enormous arms. Death threatens! He could have thrown Little Tchaikovksy the length of the House.

I didn't see anything except Big Kung Fu and Little Tchaikovsky and the usual crap of the smoking lounge. Heavy armchairs with black vinyl cushions you could wipe the vomit off of with a bleach-soaked rag. Sometimes you had to.

Keith Died This Weekend

Solid maple end tables littered with peanut shells and Styrofoam cups. A big TV with a satellite box locked in a cabinet with a Plexiglas door. The remotes dangling from it on cables. Bobby wasn't around to lock them up.

That was really the issue. Because of the commotion Big Kung Fu had lost his place on Express Vue.... Lost Insatiable Co-Eds.... I told Little Tchaikovksy as sternly as I could without laughing. Harassment was grounds for eviction. I kicked him out of the lounge, Salle Pleyel, Shangri-La, Villa Wahnfried, Paradise.

"Just let me finish my cigarette," he pleaded, flapping his gloved hand.

He had it in his mouth, between his lips, lit. I said no, get out of here right now. Get out of the House for all I care. I picked Tchaikovsky's butt up off the floor where he'd thrown it down and hurled it into the doorway on my way out. The flaming cig....

*

Psychiatric Advocates…. Social Workers…. They called themselves Front Line Workers…. Fighting in society's trenches…. On behalf of the outcasts society made…. Anti-oppressionists, according to community college course descriptions…. Really they were pretty much what Poindexter said they were…. Low-functioning…. Timeserving…. Lazy…. Fucked-up….

Keith was more charitable. Discussing the field with him one evening, I said I thought I thought it attracted a lot of losers. He said it attracted a lot of insecure people. I thought Keith himself was the principal exception, until he blew out his brains with his father-in-law's Luger. Only a week ago he'd been talking about flue shots. There was a shortage of the vaccine but he'd qualify because he was a "Front Line Worker"….

I remember watching him sprawling as usual in the office-chair beside the computer. He asked me if I had a G.P. Of course I didn't. It looked like it was going to be a really bad flue season…. He'd already had a bad cold that he still couldn't get rid of…. It kept coming back…. Now it was in his chest…. He patted it with his large hand…. That he held the Luger with.... He said he thought all the staff should get their shots this year....

*

Ariel was fat and flighty. She was Huey's worker. He showed me a picture that she had given him of a room in her house. It was full of caged birds. She was always going on about how much Huey had improved since she'd been working with him. She knew that I used to take Huey shopping. She pretended to be grateful but she resented my involvement.

Vito had been Huey's worker before her and he was the same. When he heard that I'd taken Huey out for a coffee, he thanked me as if I'd taken him out. Huey was their cash cow. For a while Vito remained his worker too, although Ariel had officially taken over. That was fine with Huey. Keith said Vito was just using him to pad his caseload. Huey was spoiled.

Once I offended Ariel by helping Huey buy a whole case of pop at the "No Frills." Otherwise he'd have spent his meagre pin money buying pop from the Koreans at three or four times its value. Ariel said I was spoiling his diet. Huey was fat with a bad face rash but there was absolutely nothing in his life besides trips to the Goodwill, the occasional movie, and treats. He usually borrowed the movies from the office and watched them alone in his room. We were always getting cigs for the other tenants. Cigs gave you cancer. Huey didn't even smoke. Cokes gave you stomachache and made you fat, but it didn't matter if Huey got fat. He was already fat. His weight didn't change.

Nonetheless Ariel had to do something to assert herself. That was what it was all about. She settled for exchanging his regular cokes for diet. I remember her balancing the case on her ample thigh on her way back to "No Frills," lecturing us on how wrong it was to ruin Huey's diet. What a fine, pro-active worker she was.

Keith was better. Staff routinely emptied all the cans of pop into a pitcher, thinking that it discouraged waste. Keith would never do so. He asked me if I wouldn't rather have my own pop. Of course I would. Keith put the tenants' dignity above such parsimonious economizing. He always made the imaginative effort to put himself in the tenants' situation.

Ariel and Vito were just insecure. That was confirmed for me again one afternoon when Ariel came into the office and I caught her little bird-like eyes studying me as I gave Angel her 4 o'clock meds. She said she didn't want to butt in (which was a lie) but I'd just committed a major medication error. I'd tapped the pills into my hand first, and then handed them to Angel. That meant I was dispensing. We could be sued for that. I explained that Angel's hands had been too unsteady for me to give her her pills straight out of the dosette. There were worse things for which we could be sued. There were things for which we deserved to be sued.

Who would bother? Society? We were society. We were its parsimonious economizing manifest. What about all the times the hospital screwed up because they'd laid off all the trained pharmacists? We had to touch the meds with our hands or poison the tenant. We were always getting our hands dirty. We had neurotoxins on our hands as well as in our sewage.

The manager was present for part of this exchange. I watched as he slowly removed his glasses and rubbed his brow. She'd interrupted his accounting. Later he told me to ignore her. She was on our health and safety committee. She'd never sat her ample ass on anything better than a toilet. She took herself too seriously. She hadn't realized it was all cosmetic.

By then Keith had returned from the kitchen where he'd been finishing the tacos. I said she was a bitch. Keith said to stop complaining and "play the game." That was very British.

*

It bothers me to think that as Keith was getting ready to die I was typing on my laptop. I might even have been playing a computer game. Keith hated computers, partly because his wife had been in the computer business. More specifically she'd been a web-designer. A friend of mine, a highly competent programmer, said web-designers were a dime a dozen. Everyone considered himself one. The state of the computer business, and his wife's ambition to return to it, compounded Keith's problems. I remember him telling the manager what he'd told his wife. Forget about getting back into computers. Just earn some money. I also think he was jealous. He described to me how his wife would work on her computer late at night. He'd hear her swearing when it crashed.

About a month before his death he complained to me that she'd bought an expensive new Toshiba at Costco. She was working again, but not in the computer business. She'd lined up an interview for a job selling web space. She intended to use the laptop to prepare her presentation. It cost nearly $3000, but her plan was to return it after the interview. Keith assumed he'd get stuck with it. He'd wanted to buy himself a nice surround-sound system that only cost $300.

A few days ago we were working in the kitchen and I told him about emulators. He knew about my programmer friend. Like Keith's web-designing wife he was unable to find work in his field. He spent a lot of time thinking about games and memory. They consumed enormous amounts of it. Keith said he though we should get out of our little “box” and see more of the world. I showed him my genuine Commodore Business Machines wristwatch. He laughed at it. I told him about the emulator for the Commodore 64 and how all I had to do was

download it and some games. “Yahoo,” he said.

I was also drinking beer and listening to Tristan. It was a long opera so I would have been listening to the Liebestodt in the morning when he died. That seemed more appropriate. One afternoon a week ago we were standing on the front porch of the House. He'd offered me one of his Du Maurier Ultra Lites to smoke with him before he went home. It was a part of our routine. I didn't take it because I still had that bad cold. Keith said that meant I wasn't a true smoker. True smokers would just “smoke through.” It was six o'clock and already getting dark. I said it reminded me of standing on the porch last year. I repeated what I said then, that it was like looking down a dark tunnel into winter and Christmas.

I showed him the CDs, another of those historical performances on Naxos that I always seemed to be buying. I'd already purchased quite a few. I loaned him one of Scriabin's preludes. He listened to it but didn't like it. He said it sounded like it was performed on an old upright. He called Scriabin “Scabies.” He noticed right away that the Tristan was marked “AAD.” I explained that it was still the best version in the catalog, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwangler. Of course, it was an analogue recording. It must have been my ability to buy compact disks whenever I wanted that made him sigh: “I'm so tired of being broke.” That was something else that hadn't changed since last year.

*

Last spring Keith and I went with Angel to the annual general meeting. It was mainly a rubber stamp. The executive director presented the budget and asked for someone to move that it be accepted. She looked around the auditorium. No one stirred. Finally Angel stood up. "I just want to say," she began. Keith tugged at her sleeve. "Just say you move that we accept it." She did.

Next was a presentation by a woman who'd directed a movie about the relationship between mentally ill people and the

police. The director was a well-heeled Bohemian from Richmond Hill. She'd spent several hours riding around with the cops as they responded to crises and took people in for assessment. She said it all came down to a three point support plan. Housing, family, and friends. Afterwards Keith observed that all of our tenants had been abandoned by their family. Few of them had strong frienships. It would require a very strong friendship to withstand so much hardship and loss. We offered housing or at least shelter, but they were always getting evicted or running away. When the woman referred to the cops as our frontline mental health workers, Toby, who had come on his own for the free food, guffawed loudly, swore, and walked out. The woman did her best to ignore him.

She seemed relieved when Howard put up his hand to talk. At his most unctuous, he told us how much he liked the police. He'd never had any trouble with them. When he was stranded north of Hogtown, they gave him a ride home. I remembered that episode. The manager had wanted him to walk, but he'd frightened the locals so much, with his catatonic posturing and his delusional friends, that they called the police to have him removed.

Howard's relationship with the police wasn't really so amicable. With his male lover he stole from his female lover, a tenant in another house. He and his boyfriend evaded punishment because the boyfriend was under age and Howard was mentally ill so not held responsible. Howard did his best to use the cops as his escort service to his "spa," the luxurious Holstein Centre, where he eloped whenever he was broke and feeling suicidal. He overdid it when, to get them to come to Anomie House, he claimed to be a little girl's murderer, the object of a grim and intensive man-hunt. I don't know what they said to him. I'm sure it wasn't friendly.

After the presentation, Keith, Angel and I went outside with some of the other tenants. Keith smoked a Du Maurier Extra Lite. He handed out house cigarettes to the others. The lasagna was greasy. Amanda complained. Now her stomach was sore as well as her bum. Poindexter would have told her

it was from letting too many men stick their dicks up it. Keith told her to work it off. March up and down on the spot. He showed her how.

*

One night in particular makes me think his suicide was planned, not an impulsive act born of sudden despair. It might still have been an act of despair. It could equally have been an act of defiance. It was as if he wanted to tell me some things before he went. The only reason for telling me then would have been imminent death. He let me make him a coffee in a Styrofoam cup. I made it strong. He quaffed it all at once and shook his head like a dog coming out of the water. It was instant so it was bitter. Then we went upstairs and he sat with me in the office after six o'clock. His shift ended at six. He usually left a few minutes earlier.

Keith wanted to warn me about Leroy. Leroy was still angry with me because I'd complained about him for accusing me of treating the tenants "like shit." I'd been following standard procedures. Toby came to the office just as I was about to give Leroy shift change. He complained that he was out of cigarettes. I said I was sorry but I couldn't do anything about it, as he'd had his cigarettes for the day. He said he wanted his cigarettes for the next day (he got a pack a day, each one dated). I again said no, because that would only leave him short tomorrow. Toby then became indignant about the arrangement of keeping cigarettes in the office and not getting them all at once, so I suggested that he speak to his worker.

Then Leroy got involved, scoffed at the arrangement, and asked Toby if he'd consented to it. Toby denied that he had. Leroy continued to scoff, ignoring my information that Toby had a memory problem and had probably given consent and forgotten about it. Toby got upset, told me to fuck off, and stormed out of the office. When I tried to resume shift-change, Leroy kept grumbling about my alleged mistreatment of Toby. When I came to Toby's name on the list, and mentioned that he wasn't supposed to get more than one pack

of cigs a day, Leroy ignored me. I asked him several times if he'd heard me.

Suddenly Leroy flared at me and accused me of treating him like a child. I told Leroy that I merely wanted to finish shift-change without having to listen to a lot of negativity, and wanted to be sure that he was paying attention. He let me finish, but with a very ill grace. Later, when we were serving in the kitchen, he accused me of treating the tenants “like shit.”

I don't know why Leroy became so incensed about our arrangement with Toby. He followed the same procedure himself with Angel and Lois, and was always warning me not to let them scam me for extra cigs. Harry Parson, the so-called “Team Leader,” made Leroy apologize. At first he denied everything. Then he prevaricated. He said he’d accused me of treating the tenants “like dirt.”

His principal line of defense was what he termed “our good relationship.” He showed the “Team Leader” the sunglasses I'd given him. He said I was always giving him CDs. That should have been my line. It never occurred to him that such behavior was inconsistent with treating people like shit or dirt. He was an ass. He offered a half-assed apology and took a week off to recover. When he got back he did it all over again. Nothing was done about it by the “Team Manager.” Because of Leroy's irresponsibility the House couldn't accommodate anyone with serious problems. Leroy simply couldn't be trusted to do the work that would keep them and the rest of the House secure. He was why Luigi and Lois were evicted. There was no team.

Keith said Leroy was still grumbling about me. He warned me to be careful what I said in front of him. That was generous considering that a while ago we'd had a loud argument in Leroy's presence. At least the worst of it happened during break.

He usually came to work at a quarter to ten. That was what we were supposed to do, at least till Bertha became

uncomfortable with it. I'd started at a quarter to 8 and was just finishing the morning meds when he called to say he'd be late. He was going shopping. He assured me he wouldn't be any later than 10:30 however. He didn't like to leave a relief person alone during the day. I don't think things were any more likely to go wrong then than at night. Things were only apt to get busier. I think Keith wanted to feel needed. One way to feel needed was to act as if one were. In reality there was nothing we were needed for that anyone couldn't do. Whether or not anyone really would was another matter. Who would even know?

The locksmith arrived around 10 to install a combination lock on the back door. It was something the manager and Keith had decided to do. I thought it was a bad idea. They probably hadn't thought about it at all. The locksmith should have come earlier. The maintenance man gave him the address then forgot to meet him. Peter obviously hadn't told him anything about the House. The locksmith saw Katrina sitting on the steps and asked her if she'd called him. I think she'd had another quarrel with Bessie that morning. Katrina told the locksmith to fuck off. I noticed him sitting in his truck and invited him into the House.

Keith arrived around 10:30. I was talking to the locksmith as Keith got out of his little car and removed the purple bins from the trunk. The bins were heavy. I returned to the office and looked out the bay window just as he started to carry them into the basement. He was wearing shorts and I could tell that his knees were bothering him. I went out to give him a hand. I saluted him from the steps.

That is one of the indelible images I have of him. It has been running in the background since I first saw it. Unlike the tapes in the security video, it's legible. Keith carries the purple bin with the four-litre bags of milk. I know it's heavy, because I've carried it myself. He wears a checked short-sleeved shirt open over a white T-shirt, shorts, gymn sock, and running shoes. The "Roots" bag hangs from his shoulder. I notice the bandage under the brace, and the brace itself.

Unfortunately before I'd even carried a bin into the kitchen I started to complain about that stupid lock. He asked me to please let him get settled first. He liked to take his time in the morning. He would put his "Roots" bag on the worn office chair beside the computer. He'd remove his Ray Ban glasses and put them away in their case. Finally he'd hang up his bag on one of the hooks beside the mantle. Then he was ready for shift change.

I sat down at the little round table. I started with Lois. That morning I hadn't found any urine in cups on her dresser. The clothes weren't wet in her hamper, so she hadn't urinated there either. I proceeded down the list, reading from a sheet of yellow foolscap. Luigi was out. Leonard had drunk a whole litre of orange juice. That was nothing new. I said I'd had no contact with Lawrence.

Keith stopped me. Wasn't that Lawrence he'd just seen finishing his breakfast in the dining room? It was. I was reading the notes I'd taken two hours ago during shift-change with Bobby. Keith loved to trip me up. It was something one did to one's understudy. I apologized and resumed shift change. There wasn't anything important. Someone was getting some cumedin that he hadn't got before. So and so's cigsand pin money had arrived for the weekend, two packs and a two dollar coin taped to each pack. Someone's clozapine had been increased by 25mg. Nothing major.

I returned to the topic of the lock. I was against it. The back door opened into a smoking lounge in a remote part of the House. It was full of expensive audio-visual equipment, all in plain view. The room had already been plundered once. Keith was in one of his dogmatic moods and asserted that if it was a security problem it was because we weren't doing our job. He meant that since we were supposed to do rounds every hour, we'd catch anyone sneaking in through the back. I took offense.

I stood up. My voice shook. The manager said I was too emotional. Maybe I needed anger management, and something for O.C.D. as well. Keith’s voice was always so

even, so well-modulated. He said it was because he was burnt out. I asked him as steadily as I could if the loss of several thousand dollars worth of audio visiaul equipment would be casually written off. Keith urged me to act like an adult, not a wise thing to say to a man who was getting upset, and who was convinced that he was right.

Keith got up and went over to his bag hanging beside the mantle. He removed removed two cigarettes from the pack of Du Maurier Extra Lites. He tapped me on the shoulder, the cigarettes extended between the fingers of his hand. Come one, he said. I wouldn't go.

At 3:30 Keith told me I could go home. I know, I said. I was being dismissed. Usually he let me stay for shift change with Leroy. He probably wanted me to go before Leroy had a chance to see how distraught I was. It would have confirmed his worst suspicions regarding my "certifiablility."

I foiled Keith's good intentions. He and Leroy were smoking on the porch. I was sitting on my porch next door. I was still angry. I called over to Leroy. Hey, I said. I think I'll come over tonight and steal a television from the lounge, since I know the combination. Keith wheeled around. Ass-hole, he called me. I said he was an ass-hole himself. He said if I had "issues" with him, we'd go for a walk and discuss them like adults. I wish I'd gone. I believe he was treating me like his wife.

*

I think Leroy was jealous of Paddy and Bobby's certified status. He was convinced I had it too. Perhaps mine was only honorary. Certainly I deserved it and in the context it would have been a lot more useful than my doctorate. I think it would have opened doors to me, presented options, created opportunities. It was like membership in a club which automatically got you invited elsewhere. It's true that you might not want it. You might even regard it with dread, because membership was irreversible. It was also, and this is

important, entirely by nomination. One couldn't refuse. There was something to Leroy's position.

I now realize that Keith "belonged' but for some reason chose not to enjoy his privileges. He never used that card, while his manic wife ran up considerable debt with the others. Yet I remember one morning he told me. "I'm crazy, " he said. "We all are." He meant himself, Paddy and Bobby. Despite how desperately I wanted to belong there, with him, he hadn’t included me. I’m jealous too.

*

I have a lot of leisure time since Keith's death. He's dead but I'm a ghost. I haunt the Porkdale hot-spots. Places he wouldn't be caught dead in. I'm also an heir. My mother died a few months ago. She left me some money. Thanks to the two of them I've been able to imtiate the rich, with spare time and money. There the similarity ends. The parody begins.

I get out of bed. It's difficult without a job and Keith to go to. I still wake up at shift change time. Part of me wants to get back to work. I used to be so glad to get those last minute calls from the manager or Bobby. I was usually told only that the manager wouldn't be coming in that day for his usual 8 to 4 P.M. shift. Sometimes Bobby told me, with a confidential air and a request to keep it to myself, that he was depressed.

They didn't want Leroy to know. Leroy wasn't supposed to know if one of them had a tooth ache. Leroy didn't care and either way I got to work with Keith. Most of the time I worked for him too. I would bake cookies, cook chicken breasts and do roasts at night, things Bobby never attempted. The whole house benefitted, but the whole house never thanked me. Keith told me how much he appreciated it. Once after I'd worked a week of midnights, Keith told me how much he was going to miss my help after Bobby got back. He said he didn't know why the company didn't fire him and hire a security guard at minimum wage. That's what he was.

Keith Died This Weekend

I make strong coffee in a "Braun" espresso machine. I steam the milk in a pyrex measuring cup and pour it over the coffee in a glass. I have that while I type something on my lap-top. Then I go for a walk, usually to the Sally Anne at Lansdowne and the Goodwill at the end of Thing Street. Most of the staff are psych survivors. They share apartments, live in rooms. Some even live in group homes. Most of the customers should be committed. They're certifiable.

Today an old guy bothered me at the Sally Anne. He was very nosy about a Yashika movie camera that I was examining. He obviously wanted it for himself, so he started to give me all kinds of advice. He said I wouldn't be able to get film for it, it didn't have any batteries, etc. When I walked down an aisle to escape him, I heard him tell the cashier to watch me, I was probably going to steal it. That made me angry. I walked up to the counter, told the man to "shut up," and bought it. I heard him grumbling behind me. Canadians were crazy.

*

I e-mailed Keith's pictures to Bruce. I found Bruce last night on the world-wide-web by typing "Keith Darren Toronto." That brought up the URL of a web site devoted to radio controlled toys. Bruce was devoted to "foamies" -- model airplanes made out of Styrofoam, I assume. He was a contributor to several discussion "threads." He had put Keith's name, his dates ('65-'04) and "RIP" on his profile.

It turned out that Keith had introduced him to "foamies." Bruce beat him very badly at poker one night, about twenty years ago. Keith had just bought an airplane and hadn't even put it together yet. Keith offered Bruce the plane in lieu of money; otherwise he'd have been broke for the rest of the week.

Bruce was devoted to Keith. Probably his best friend. He had been out of touch the last few years, mainly because he and Keith were also drinking buddies, and Bruce was a recovering alcoholic. But he had known Keith well for over eighteen

years. He had been one of his pallbearers at the funeral service I didn't go to. I wondered if Keith didn't have any close friends before he died. Maybe if there'd been at least one he would have had someone to unburden himself to. Maybe he wouldn't have felt so bad that the only relief was shooting himself. Who did Keith have?

I remember teasing Keith by pretending to commiserate with his wife about what it was like being married to him. He replied with that surprising bitterness of his. He said she didn't have any idea what it was like to be married to him.

Keith tired himself out last fall by helping his brother move. This was hard on him, because of the disability that made him wear a brace on his left leg. He also had a lot of trouble sleeping at night, because of his chronic pain. Carting stuff up and down stairs was especially hard on his bad knees. I asked him why he didn't just say no. He said he couldn't say no to his brother. I believe his brother was capable of saying no to him. A little later I told Keith they must be close, but he said they weren't. Why put himself out, then? I'm convinced that he had no one.

*

We were standing on the steps. Keith was smoking. I was saying something about the stress that went with our work. I said I coped with it by turning into someone else. I said I guessed that sounded pretty bad. Keith said it sure did. Later we were sitting in the office. It must have been the same day. He'd just got off the phone. He'd been talking to his wife. “Please,” he said, “Don't be schizophrenic.” He probably thought that was what I meant when we were standing on the porch. He'd been drained by his wife's phone call and was feeling the strain of dealing with illness. We were becoming friends. He didn't want to know that another person he was close to was ill. He didn't think he could stand the strain.

I never told him that the “someone else” I tried to become was him. When I felt myself wanting to shout at Angel for asking

me for a cigarette every five minutes, I remembered the level tone of his voice and tried to imitate it. When I was tired and wanted to cut corners by not sweeping behind the garbage pail in the kitchen, I moved it and swept behind it in his name. When Howard tried my patience by begging me to call the police because he had an axe and was going to kill someone, I remembered his reasonable firmness and remained calm. When the staff demoralized me with their mean sloth and ill-concealed sham idealism, I followed his example and did my job. As much as possible I did it the same way he did his. He eschewed idealism. He just did the best he could so no one could say he didn't.

It was just a job. People like Leroy or “Svengali,” who blew hard about “being there for THEM,” weren't doing the job. They never cleaned anything. They cooked only when they felt like it, which was seldom. They slept all night. They forgot to sign for medications. Sometimes they forgot to give them at all. Face it. They were there for money. Keith was there for the money too, and to do as good a job as he could. Maybe in the end he felt it just wasn't good enough.

I remember him teasing me because I worked so hard in the kitchen. At night I'd cook enough for the next three days. He said I couldn't compete with him, but a few days before he killed himself he sampled everything I'd cooked that day and said it was “all good.”

*

I remember the last conversation we had. I think it started with Keith agreeing to have a coffee with me for a change. This time he made it himself. He made mine strong, the way I liked it. He made his own strong too, probably because he intended to stay late and he was already tired. I remember him showing me the heaping tablespoon of dark instant coffee mix at the bottom of the Styrofoam cup, asking if it was OK. I got the pitcher of milk out of the fridge. He added a lot to his coffee, and drank it all at once. He'd never get used to it. It was bitter. He shook his head. We went upstairs into the

office. Keith grabbed the bottle of painkillers that was in its usual place, beside his Ray-Bans on the mantle. He took some tablets with a swig from the water bottle in the same place. His knees were bothering him. He was still wearing shorts, I think for the last time that year, maybe ever. His knees looked puffy and sore. It was Friday. He'd been shopping.

I must have said something about my shifts, probably that I was doing a double. That meant that I'd started at 4 that afternoon - Leroy's shift - and wouldn't finish till 8 tomorrow morning.

Keith sat down at the little round table where the manager counted the cigarette money. He moved his chair a little closer to the door, so he could stretch out his long legs and put his size 12 feet up on the photocopier while he gave me shift change. He ran down the list of twenty names tacked to the bulletin board beside the door.

I think the only news was Manon. She wasn't doing very well. She hadn't come downstairs for breakfast, lunch, or supper. In fact she hadn't come out of her room all day. He mentioned the minutes I'd done of our meeting with her team. He said they were fine except for one mistake. I'd attributed the manager's suggestion that Manon be given injections to a team member. Apart from that they were fine. In the future all I needed to do was record the main points. He only wished that his own contributions hadn't been limited to five word statements.

He was doodling on one of those hose pads of cheap yellow foolscap that we used to make notes on during shift change. He was clearly abstracted.

Keith said I was there far too much. He said at this rate I’d be burnt out in six months. At the time I thought he was being mean. Now I realize he was only thinking ahead.

*

There is at least one other conversation I remember, and I wish I didn't because it has become a source of pain to me. Our one big argument is relatively easy for me to live with. It was more justified, because there was wrong on both sides. The conversation was really an attack. I was angry with Keith over something trivial. He had been angry himself with the staff. I think it was with the night guy for not taking any initiative. He never cleaned anything, partly because he was feuding with Leroy. His principal work at night was making ten sandwiches for lunch. Too often they were what Poindexter called “prison fare,” a slice of bologna between two slices of “Wonder” bread slathered with margarine. He had to be told to use up the roast.

He clearly had “control issues.” Without guidance he would lock things up, put away things we needed to use, post signs telling the tenants what to do, etc. There wasn't any guidance. Keith and I tried to get the manager to stop Bobby from locking up the T.V. set in the smoking lounge. Every midnight, shortly after coming on duty, he'd go into the lounge, turn off the T.V., and lock it. Even if the tenant was in the middle of a program that he wanted to watch. Several of the tenants had complained to Keith, Leroy, and myself. Tenants were afraid to start watching a movie around midnight, because they knew Bobby would interrupt them.

While this might seem trivial, it was directly contrary to the ethos of the House as a home, a “non-custodial” facility. Bobby offered no excuse other than the noise. Yet the tenants routinely slept with their radios blaring. Bobby himself was always entering their rooms at night to turn them down. They slept through fire alarms. Half of them symbolically burned to death every fire drill. When we suggested that Bobby simply ask the tenant to turn down the volume, he told us that it was “his” shift and what he did on “his” shift was “his” business – or in other words none of ours.

Keith observed, balefully trite, that it was hard to soar with eagles when you worked with turkeys. He said he hated Anomie House. As for me, he said he was fed up with me leaving garbage in the drain. He went over to the sink were I'd

just rinsed the rice pot. He found some grains of rice as well as pieces of tomato and lettuce from the salad. I thought it was mean of him, considering that I'd worked all day in the kitchen while he'd been sitting in the office doing "quarterly entries." I said I did the best I could. He said, mocking me now, that he knew I had my limitations. I got angry then and started to criticize the way the House was run. I did my best, but a lot of people didn't pull their own weight. Keith said something about working for a different House. No doubt about it, he'd do better in a better-run house. I'd heard it all before.

He wanted me to stop thinking about the sink, to come upstairs and have a cigarette. In the office I couldn't help thinking about his remarks, and I said something. I can still see him reaching for that bottle of painkillers. Please don't obsess about the sink, he pleaded. Outside he sat down on some of the railroad ties that lined the little garden. I can still see him. He was wearing a shirt over a T-shirt, running shoes, shorts. I could see the pressure bandage under the brace. Parts of the brace had been repaired with hockey tape. He was wearing his Ray-Bans.

He said he could get a factory job. I told him that was delusional thinking. He was forty, and had a disability. Moreover, factory jobs weren't so plentiful any more. It was just a delusional fantasy. I said in reality he was trapped, like nearly everyone else. He said it was my thinking that was trapped. I said no, I was just being realistic. He had an expensive wife, an expensive mortgage, two cars to pay for, etc. Where else would he get the same benefits he got from the House? He said he didn't care about the house, or the cars either. He'd done a lot of things before working as a support worker. He'd rebuilt cars and renovated houses. I really didn't know him very well. I said I hoped he was right, if it meant knowing bad things about him.

*

Only two weeks before Keith's death the manager hired a

woman. He said she was just going to help with the tenants' hygiene and do a little housekeeping. I had my doubts. For one thing he gave her extra training, more than I ever got and I was supposed to be above her in the hierarchy. She was my successor. She'd inherit the snake.

At any rate the manager obviously liked the new woman a lot. On the Wednesday after Keith's death the manager, the executive director and myself were sitting in the office. I had just come back from my rather disturbing shopping trip. The director was acting as our grievance counsellor. She'd no doubt attended a seminar on bereavement. It was all so terrible. Keith, our Keith. Who would have believed it. The manager agreed. There'd been no signs.

Suddenly she turned to him and asked how the new woman was doing. Great, he said. Lose one, find one.

*

Bathurst Street Head office was a strange place. It was suitably located on the edge of the old Thing Street Asylum's "catchment area." In reality its catchment area was the entire downtown core. Bathurst Street was the penumbra, Porkdale was total eclipse, and the asylum was the moon.

I called to get my separation papers. They were already 3 months late. They should have been processed automatically. I asked the woman who answered for the name of the accountant, so I could write her myself. She immediately became suspicious. She wanted to know my name. They employed a lot of "survivors." Paranoid subtype? I said my name was none of her business, but their accountant's name was public information. She still wouldn't give it to me, so I looked it up on a website.

*

I was on my way to the bank. I had just passed the House, face averted from the big bay window where the office was. The blinds were drawn. It was like the fish tank of someone who didn't want his fish to be seen. That probably meant Poindexter was on duty. The manager wasn't very visible these days.

*

I saw Donald standing in front of the House. He hadn't been around much since Bessie went to the Institute down the street. He occasionally came to the porch, at least if Keith or the manager was standing there, to tell us how she was doing. She hadn't changed. Before the Institute she'd been in the hospital. They'd made an opening in her throat to help her breath, but she still smoked.

She still ate too much. She used to call in the afternoon to say hello to Katrina and Amanda, and to find out what we were having for supper. She still hoped to return to the House. She had her mother call in the evening, after Keith and the manager had gone home, with the news that she'd be back that Friday. She wanted us to treat her return as imminent and inevitable. It was neither.

Bessie's mother was aware of the problem. That was why she phoned. She said that Bessie would sit outside if anyone was smoking in the lounge. She'd never been inside the House, so she must have discussed Bessie's condition with her "team." Someone from the team must have mentioned that almost everyone in the House was a smoker. The lounge was always full of smoke. Bessie couldn't sit on the porch all winter. She couldn't sit on it one day. Keith didn't want the tenants to sit on the porch.

I visited her once at the Institute. I hadn't been there since Barrie went there to die. One didn't go there to get better. I brought her a big bag of potato chips and some candy. I didn't think her diet mattered any more. She was sitting right inside

the door. She seemed glad to see me. She stuffed the chips and the candy into her enormous purse. She looked smaller, though that might have been an effect of the lobby. It was larger and brighter than the lounge I was used to seeing her in. The air was clean. No one was smoking. She was still overweight. She still had style. The white bandage stood out against her black throat. She asked about Amanda and Katrina. They were fine. They missed her and wondered how she was doing. She said that was nice. She knew it wasn't true.

She said she missed Keith. I think that was true. I remember how she talked about him in the office. After discussing her illness, she discussed his. I didn't know he had one. She used terms that Howard applied to himself, that seemed more appropriate applied to Keith. She worried about him because he was so sensitive, so fragile. Fragile was Howard's word. It still sounded counterfeit.

We should have let her come back. Wherever she was she'd smoke too much, eat too much, and not exercise at all. Poindexter said she didn't give a fuck. We were afraid of having to handle her dressings. We were afraid she'd die on our hands.

I saw Bessie sitting on the railing in front of the House. She'd ventured out of the Institute and up the street to see Keith. It would have taken considerable effort, even if she'd been in shape. She'd never been in shape. She was crying. Howard passed her on his way into the House. I heard him grunt "Come on, Keith."

*

A woman shout "Jon - Jo-on" in a deep, raucous voice. A second woman called "Hi" in a much lighter voice. I recognized the first woman. It was Amanda. I didn't recognize the second immediately, then I realized she was Amanda's worker. She'd had her hair done.

She asked me where I'd been. I told her I'd left. She asked why. I said because of Keith. It was entirely because of Keith. You mean because he left, she said. Left, I said, wondering if she was being euphemistic. Sorry, she said. She was thinking of me and how I'd left, and of Keith. She paused. I realized there were similarities but so far they were superficial.

Just too upset? She probed a little. I said what happened was really terrible. I didn't agree with the people at work about it. She nodded. I said it really offended me the way they came from head office to help us grieve when they never did anything to prevent something like this happening when he was alive. They should have grieved more themselves, and felt guilty. I said it really bothered me that things that contributed to his death were still in effect. Nothing was done about them. Nothing would be.

She said I should know that I wasn't the only one who thought that way....

I thanked her for talking to me. I entered an Internet cafe and sent an e-mail to Keith's wife expressing my sadness at Keith's death. Then I went to the bank. I couldn’t make a withdrawal, because the system was down.

*

Vito phoned the police. When I got home after my walk I saw their car parked in front. I guessed what had happened. The cops confirmed it. Keith's wife became concerned that I myself was suicidal. She phoned the House. Vito was a busybody as well as a know-all. The manager had instructed him to leave me alone. Nonetheless Vito asked to see my letter. She e-mailed him a copy. What do you expect from a York University psychology major? He couldn’t read. He was treating me like a tenant.

Keith Died This Weekend

*

There are so many indications that Keith wanted to be missed, appreciated, loved. Maybe if he'd known how much he'd be missed, he'd not have gone. It pains me to think that, but I do. I remember him serving lunch through the pass-through in the dining room. He'd just got back from a two-week vacation that he'd mainly spent visiting his father in the hospital. He had cancer and he'd been gravely ill. He'd been delusional, and had tried to punch Keith. Keith had visited him every day. Keith was unwell himself, exhausted and burnt-out.

Suddenly Keith turned to me in the kitchen and asked me if anyone had missed him. I'm afraid I said something mocking. In truth most of our tenants were beyond missing us. They'd already been abandoned by everyone that mattered or ought to matter in their lives. They probably only got through their day by deliberately not missing people and things infinitely more important than ourselves. No, they hadn't missed him.

About a week before he shot himself he was getting some chicken pieces out of our new freezer in the pantry. They were supposed to have been separated and bagged in lots of twenty-five. Unfortunately they'd arrived on one of Keith's sick days. It hadn't happened. It was probably the manager's fault. He was lazy and a bit bungling. He was really just an accountant. Keith said it looked like we needed him after all.

How wretched I think, that the self-worth of such an invaluable man should have depended on such trivia. On mattering to poor people to whom nothing much mattered anymore. On mattering to incompetent losers like ourselves who needed him to fill the freezer.

I can't speak for anyone else but he mattered to me because I loved him.

*

Bertha was leaving. She was going to learn how to be a teacher. I wouldn't miss her. She was always conning the manager for more hours, my shifts. She undermined me with the tenants, then complained to the manager that I was too harsh. If I cut Lois off cigarettes for smoking in her room, she'd give her a cigarette as soon as I left. Then she'd write a shift entry implying that I was probably smoking Lois's cigarettes myself. She was lazy, she slept all night, and she made meds errors. Because I criticized her for being late all the time, she asked me to give her a wake-up call at 5 A.M. I said she was a bitch. Keith said she was just a twit.

Another worker, Phyllis, organized a farewell party. Actually it was just a poker night, but Phyllis co-opted it for her friend. Everyone had to contribute twenty dollars to Bertha's education. When I objected, Keith said it was for a good cause. She was going to teach “our children.” Neither of us had any. I was gay and Keith's wife couldn't stand the stress of childbearing. Lately he'd thought of getting a dog. I was willing to help, but Keith said his wife had to be involved in the decision. The dog was a surrogate for children.

Keith said to consider it this way. I hated Bertha didn't I? Yes. Well, wasn't it worth twenty dollars never to see her again? Yes.

Keith drove me to and from the party that was in some horrible middle-class suburban house that Phyllis was sitting for the weekend. We didn't go shopping any more. That was the last time he took me anywhere in his car. I noticed a plastic water bottle with a hole in it. Keith asked me if I knew what it was. I said it looked like an ordinary bottle to me. He said it was a bomb. Watch. He removed a wad of tin foil from a corner of the ashtray and carefully unwrapped what looked to me like a little square of shit. At least it was brown and grainy. He said an old high-school buddy had turned up

with a big chunk of hash. Watch. He ignited the little brown square on the end of his cigarette and somehow puffed the smoke into the plastic bottle where it swirled thick and heavy. He put his mouth on the gash in the side of it and inhaled deeply. I wish I'd inhaled what was left in the bottle when he handed it back to me, but I didn't. He said it helped him get to sleep at night. It didn't appear to impair his driving.

He said don't tell anyone. Then he said he didn't care.

*

After the "viewing" Poindexter drove us back to the office. We sat for a few minutes with the manager. We were in shock. When I described what we'd seen the manager observed that Keith hadn't been able to control his own life or his own death either. The manager left first, after warning us about bad dreams. I was supposed to work early the next morning, while all the workers from Anomie Housing and Support Services attended the funeral. There was to be a sermon by a United Church minister. I wondered how that had happened. Keith had been an atheist. He said priests and ministers were as dirty as everybody else. Death was a "dirt nap." I phoned Poindexter to say that I was quitting. I had no respect for the manager. I didn't even want to tell him what time it was. I'm not sure that I Iiked Poindexter, but I respected his cynicism.

I told him that I wouldn't be in tomorrow, the day of Keith's funeral. I asked him to please notify the manager, as I didn't want to talk to him myself. I was quitting.

Poindexter asked me what was wrong. He hoped I wasn't getting all depressed. I said I didn't see any future for myself in the House. I realized that Vito would probably be Keith's successor. He was something of an old hippie too, only when he grew up -- if he ever did -- punk was all the fad. He had that flaky niceness.

I knew I couldn't abide Vito. He was a phony. He'd come in late because he was hung-over, then brag about his professionalism. He used to talk about some "meds" manual he had, how he was going to give each of us a copy to show us how to dispense meds. When I relieved him I usually found meds forgotten or not signed for. He regularly forgot Abe's noon pill. Then he'd write "refused" on his "meds" sheet. Abe never refused his “meds.”

I saw the future. I wasn't in it. I didn't want to be in it either. Poindexter tried to discourage me. He said the manager would be angry if I left without notice. I thought he should consider all the times I worked without any. It didn't bother me that he'd be angry. Nothing could make me happy.

Poindexter said he'd have no one to talk to. I said he could talk to Vito about Italian cinema. He said it had been nice knowing me.

*

On Friday afternoon Keith told me that he'd shaved off all his pubic hair. I didn't know why. He was seeing himself laid out at the morgue. He wanted to be clean.

I'm sitting on a battered park bench at the beginning of that green strip at the end of Thing Street overlooking the lake. There aren't any houses on this side of the street. When my mother was alive I used to go "home" to Chatham by train. I would look up from the tracks below and see the big houses and wonder what they were like. Now I know. I look down and don't wonder anything at all about the train and where it's going. I know that too. I can see the outdoor tennis courts of some Toronto club. They're covered with tents. They look stuffed.

The traffic reminds me of Keith and my mother and my last visits to them. I was angry with my mother because after

bringing her a computer all the way from Toronto she took her eighty-year-old boyfriend's advice that she couldn't use it. Too blind. Before I stormed out she asked me if there were anything I wanted. I said the old fart's obituary. She slapped my face. I couldn't grieve for her the way I'm grieving for Keith.

Poindexter drove me to see Keith at the funeral home in Ossington. We went down there, along the lakeshore. Keith drove home that way every night. On either side of us it was a wasteland of high-rise condos and cheap townhouses. The funeral home was a converted fire hall off an exit ramp at the town line. It was the middle of nowhere. There were a lot of cars in the lot.

We knew that Keith had shot himself. We knew about his "little" gun, a Luger given to him by his father-in-law. We assumed that he had shot himself in the head, and that it would therefore be a closed casket. An obsequious flunky escorted us into a darkened room where they were playing some sort of mellow-jazzy elevator music and there were a lot of Slavic women, his in-laws, hovering about in sequined evening gowns. It was grotesque, but the only thing I really noticed was Keith's face, in a beam of light at the end of the room. It was an open casket after all. Poindexter walked a few paces towards it, then recoiled. He'd seen enough. He was ready to go. I walked right up to the casket and studied Keith's face. There was a faint white disk in the middle of his brow. It must have been the bullet hole. The back of his head was probably blown off. I had never seen him asleep, but his eyelids looked unnaturally flat and sunken. His eyes had probably been blown out too. His lips were bloodless, thin and tight as if he were still experiencing pain.

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Keith said he'd always wanted to be an actor. He was a good one. I really didn't know him very well.

Degeneration House

Keith Died This Weekend

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